FRONTLINE

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## Cockroaches vs the ‘strongman’

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# CAN WE COEXIST?

20 years of the Forest Rights Act

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# FRONTLINE

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COVER STORY

# The FRA promise

**16**/ Two decades after the Forest Rights Act became law, the record is uneven. While the law offers a democratic framework for forest governance, its transformative potential remains unrealised because of weak implementation and resistance from bureaucrats.

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Cover image: A member of the Irula tribe shares drinking water with her goat, in a village near Udhagamandalam, Tamil Nadu.
M. SATHYAMOORTHY

TRENDING WEB EXCLUSIVES

GENDER
The state and the woman at Jantar Mantar

ETHNIC VIOLENCE
Manipur's fault lines are multiplying

INTERNET SAFETY
Why tech platforms should be regulated like high-risk industries

The headline on our cover asks, can we coexist? We ask it in the context of 20 years of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), wondering just what it will take for humans to figure out that we, the forests, the shrublands and grasslands, the animals, insects, and birds all have just this one home and that we need to share it. Not only for altruistic reasons, but for very practical ones. Without forests and greenery, the human race will not last very long. Already, the ill effects of forest degradation, overgrazing, and over-concretisation are making themselves felt each time we talk of “heatwaves” in an abstract manner and buy another air-conditioner.

Even more importantly, what our cover asks is this: when will we accept that the many vast forests are not just “resources” to be cleared for timber or ore or real estate. They are home for some people. For centuries, tribal communities have lived in these forests, and their right to the trees, to the spaces and shadows, to the fruits and leaves and thorns, to their aeons-old ways of life is an inalienable right. It was the belated recognition of this, after many decades of struggle, that brought the FRA into being in 2006. The FRA is among the most enlightened pieces of legislation that independent India has enacted, but its execution has been patchy, reluctant, and ill-informed.

The assault has been not just on the physical lands the forest communities inhabit but on their ways of life, their religions, languages, clothing, and culture. The RSS has for decades chipped away at these, its insecurities demanding uniformity, its fragile self-image frightened by differences. The Sangh Parivar’s determined programme of assimilation picked up speed after 2014, and by now it had a willing and greedy government-corporate nexus to help it forward. Coexistence? What coexistence?

As we worked with the Bengaluru-based ATREE to put this cover together, something else happened that made us ask again, can we coexist? A bunch of infuriated youngsters, who now own the “cockroach” pejorative hurled at them, took over Jantar Mantar, some fasting, some chanting, demanding accountability for the paper leaks and student suicides. It was not an unreasonable ask–the magnitude of the corruption and failure is such that any self-respecting government would have immediately sacked Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. But here the government made its first mistake: it grandly ignored the protest.

By July 20, the group had swelled to a defiant crowd more than a lakh strong set to march to Parliament to demand Pradhan’s resignation. Here, the government made its second mistake: it let the police loose on them. This act of petty retribution backfired badly. The Delhi Police might have come armed with lathis, but Gen Z came armed with cameras. The whole world saw some of the most appalling visuals of police excess. Brutal lathicharges, clothes torn, students viciously slapped, prodded, and kicked, students pummelled and pushed by frenzied policemen. And we asked, can students coexist with such a government? Can anyone?

**THE NEXT EVENING,** when opposition party members led by the Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi sat in protest in front of the Prime Minister’s residence, there were many civilised ways the government could have responded. A democracy demands that the ruling party coexist with the opposition. But the government, again, chose brute force. We saw sordid scenes of Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi, Akhilesh Yadav, Chandrashekhar Azad, and many others manhandled and dragged into police vans. As we go to press, young people continue to pour into Delhi and what began as a demand for Pradhan’s resignation is now a demand for the Pradhan Mantri’s resignation. The protest has spread across the country. The Prime Minister remains silent.

In her essay in this edition, Anuja Date writes: “In a world afflicted by rising individualism, gram sabhas still demonstrate the immense power of the collective.” It is this idea of togetherness, of community that a government is expected to nurture. Whether forest-dwellers or students, opposition parties or State governments, Dalits or Muslims, this government must learn to listen. Listen to everyone, not just its toadies. It must learn empathy, not just wield batons from a fortress of indifference and contempt. Creating divisions might have helped it win elections up to a point, but without creating coexistence it cannot hope to win the nation. With any luck, it is that one ill-judged comment by a Chief Justice that will ultimately bring this lesson home.

Vaishna

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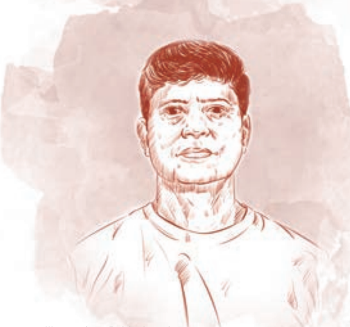

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Illustration: P. Muthuraj

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## The Punjab spin

IN Punjab, religion is not merely part of politics; politics is part of religion (Cover Story, July 31). That the elected representatives of a State are at the beck and call of a religious supremo is nothing short of making a mockery of democracy. It is a truism that God helps those who help themselves, yet the Congress, mired in internal wrangling, seems bent on ignoring it just as electoral success beckons. After some good administrative and welfarist initiatives in its early years, the AAP government has stepped into a religious minefield with its half-baked anti-sacrilege law. The BJP's solo attempt to fish in these waters will only muddy things further.

**Ayyasseri Raveendranath**
Aranmula, Kerala

RELIGIOUS faith must never become a convenient instrument for electoral politics. When sacrilege cases drag on for years, public confidence erodes and emotions become easy to exploit at election time. People want timely justice and accountability, not fresh laws rushed through without proper consultation. Political parties, whatever their ideology, must resist invoking sensitive religious issues merely to shore up vote banks.

Punjab today faces pressing challenges such as unemployment, debt, drug abuse, and agricultural distress that deserve greater attention. Constructive governance cannot be replaced by symbolic gestures. Lasting peace will come only when justice is delivered promptly and governments address the everyday concerns of the public instead of reopening old wounds.

**K. Sakunthala**
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu

POLITICAL parties often lose opportunities not because of weak public support but because of internal divisions. This is the challenge that the Congress appears to face in Punjab, where leadership disputes risk overshadowing the issues that matter to voters. Healthy internal debate is welcome, but prolonged factionalism weakens organisational discipline and confuses the electorate. Whether in government or in the opposition, parties strengthen democracy only when they place public interest above personal ambition.

**A. Senthil Kumar**
Kaniyur, Tamil Nadu

FRONTLINE
THE PUNJAB SPIN

**NOTE**
Letters, whether by surface mail or email, must carry the full postal address and the full name, or the name with initials. *Frontline* reserves the right to edit letters for brevity and clarity.

## China's Wars

I READ with interest Dammu Ravi's review of Ambassador Vijay Gokhale's *China's Wars* ("Fight and pause", July 31). Ravi rightly concludes that in international relations, as in life, mutual respect stems from a perception of equality. It is wishful thinking that China will shun its old approach and rebuild trust with India, given its long record of deviousness. The Galwan clashes have widened the trust deficit; India has done everything to allay China's apprehensions, yet China continues to regard India with suspicion.

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's faith in peaceful coexistence and his "China First" policy, especially his statement that India would not accept a seat at the UN Security Council at the expense of sidelining Beijing, was either magnanimity or naïveté. India has moved past the Nehruvian-era notion of "Chindia". With India rising, this is the moment to strengthen deterrence and press China to rethink its India policy and not rush into any engagement on China's terms.

**Sudipta Ghosh**
Murshidabad, West Bengal

## Delhi ridge

I AM a regular reader of *Frontline* and greatly value the quality and rigour of its reporting. I want to point out what appears to be a misleading statement in Vedaant Lakhera's article which calls the Delhi's Central Ridge forest "1.5 billion years old" ("A murder is announced", May 31).

This likely refers to the ancient Aravalli rock formation, but the phrasing misleads in a discussion of deforestation: the underlying rocks may be 1.5 billion years old, but the forest is not. Land plants evolved roughly 400 million years ago, and forests are far younger still. The trees being felled and the forest ecosystem itself are nowhere close to that age.

The ecological significance of the Delhi ridge does not require such rhetorical inflation. It is an immensely valuable urban forest on its own merits, and precise language will only strengthen the case for its conservation.

**Payal Yadav**
Hyderabad

### ► New Prime Minister, again

Former Manchester Mayor Andrew Burnham took office on July 20 as the seventh UK Prime Minister in a decade, even as outgoing Prime Minister Keir Starmer made history as the country's shortest-serving Labour Prime Minister. Burnham promised a new 10-year plan for Britain, alongside changes to the education system and more council homes. Britain needed to show the world that it could regain its stability, he added. CHRIS J. RATCLIFFE/BLOOMBERG

## ▸10 per cent

is the tariff that the US has imposed on imports from India and more than a dozen other countries following a months-long investigation into forced labour practices. The US had originally proposed a 12.5 per cent tariff under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974. The 10 per cent tariff places India on par with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, along with several Latin American and Asian countries. Sixty countries, accounting for more than 99 per cent of US imports, now face the tariff for failing to prohibit and effectively enforce restrictions on forced labour.

►

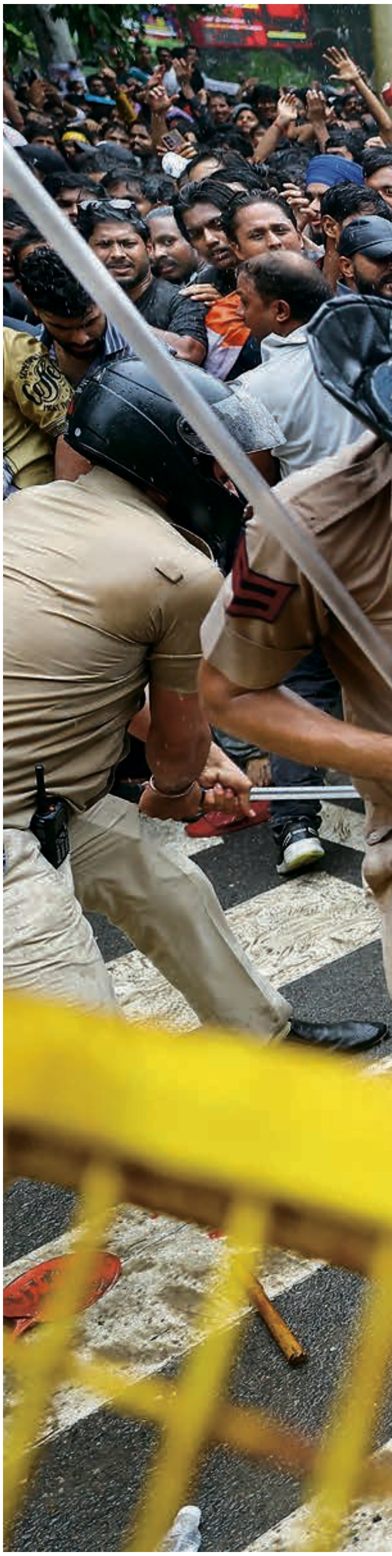
> "I love drawing and maybe I get lost in it sometimes."

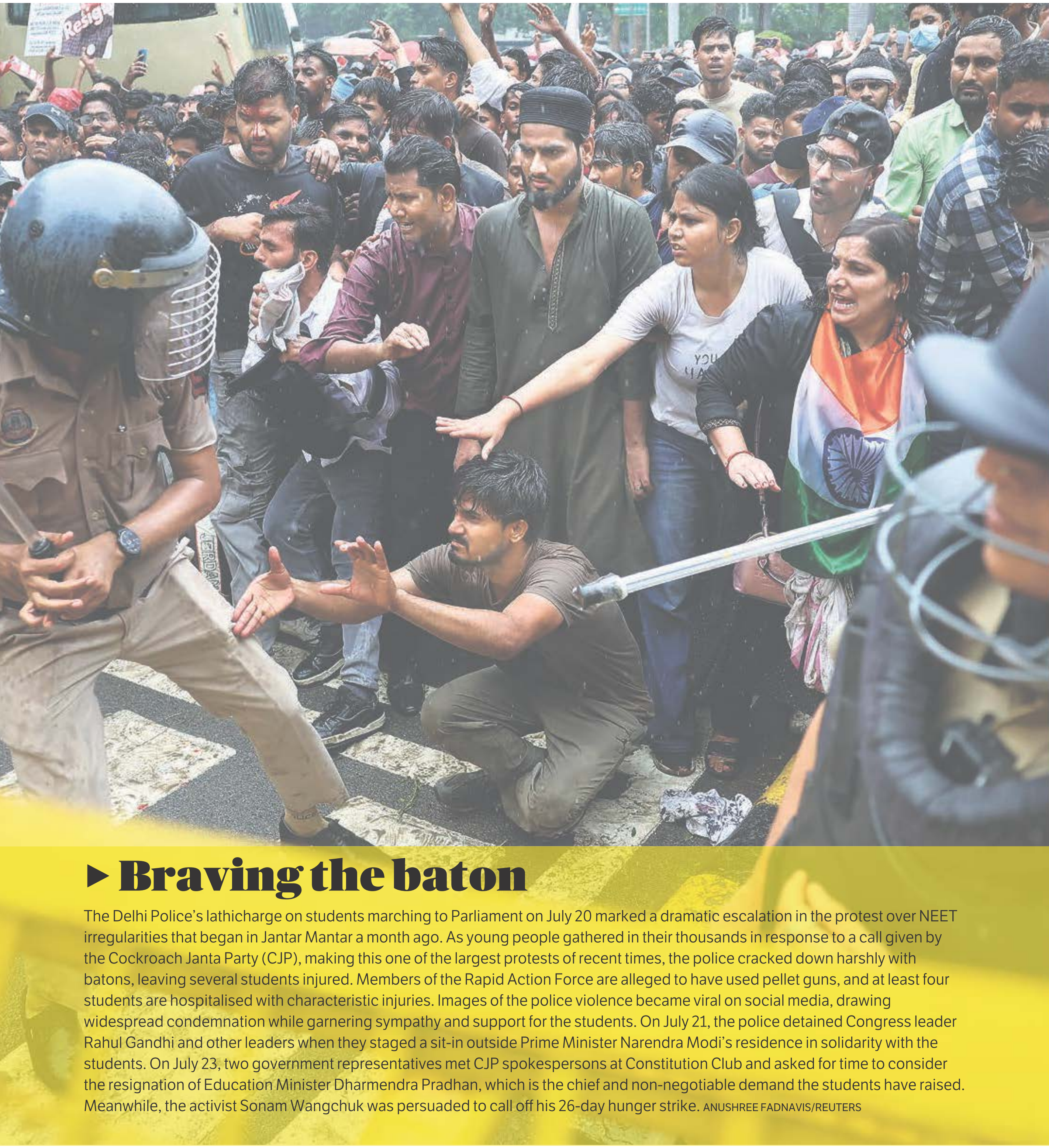
The political cartoonist **Pat Oliphant**, 90, who caricatured world leaders for over five decades, died on July 13. A winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1967, Oliphant ridiculed powerful figures from US President Lyndon B. Johnson to Donald Trump. His work tackled controversial topics, including the 2002 Catholic Church paedophilia scandals and Israel's 2008 offensive against Hamas in Gaza.

► On July 18, India became the third country after the US and China with private orbital launch capabilities when the Hyderabad-based Skyroot Aerospace launched Vikram-1 from Sriharikota. The rocket carries up to 350 kg payloads. Meanwhile, the Department of Space has tightened exit rules for scientists following large-scale resignations at ISRO, where 2,613 of 18,142 sanctioned posts are currently vacant, according to data presented in Parliament.

► On July 23, the US announced a landmark deal with Saudi Arabia that would establish a civilian nuclear programme in the Gulf country. The move comes as the US under President Donald Trump fights a war with Iran that was primarily triggered by US concerns over Tehran's nuclear programme. However, on July 24, Trump said that the nuclear cooperation deal with Saudi Arabia is "totally subject" to the kingdom normalising relations with Israel as part of the Abraham Accords.

► Spain won their second football World Cup, defeating Lionel Messi-led Argentina 1-0, in New Jersey, on July 20. While dominating the match with over 65 per cent possession, Spain also swept individual awards for Best Young Player, Best Goalkeeper, and Most Valuable Player. France's Kylian Mbappé became the first player to win the Golden Boot in two FIFA World Cups (2022 and 2026).





# ▸ Braving the baton

The Delhi Police's lathicharge on students marching to Parliament on July 20 marked a dramatic escalation in the protest over NEET irregularities that began in Jantar Mantar a month ago. As young people gathered in their thousands in response to a call given by the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), making this one of the largest protests of recent times, the police cracked down harshly with batons, leaving several students injured. Members of the Rapid Action Force are alleged to have used pellet guns, and at least four students are hospitalised with characteristic injuries. Images of the police violence became viral on social media, drawing widespread condemnation while garnering sympathy and support for the students. On July 21, the police detained Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and other leaders when they staged a sit-in outside Prime Minister Narendra Modi's residence in solidarity with the students. On July 23, two government representatives met CJP spokespersons at Constitution Club and asked for time to consider the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, which is the chief and non-negotiable demand the students have raised. Meanwhile, the activist Sonam Wangchuk was persuaded to call off his 26-day hunger strike. ANUSHREE FADNAVIS/REUTERS

# On the Path to Development

The first 100 days of the Samrat government indicate rapid development in Bihar in the days to come

**Bihar, under the leadership of its new Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary, seems to be on the fast track to all-round development. Within just 100 days of Choudhary taking over the reins of the state, Bihar has made unprecedented strides in almost all the important sectors, including infrastructure development, tourism, transport, urban growth, industry, energy, education, and the maintenance of law and order.**

# Infrastructure

At a cabinet meeting chaired by Chief Minister Choudhary on July 9, 2026, in which as many as 22 crucial decisions were taken, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government in Bihar gave its approval for the preparation of Detailed Project Reports (DPRs) for four Regional Rapid Transit System (RRTS) corridors. The project is aimed at providing safe, fast, reliable, environmentally sustainable, and efficient last-mile connectivity. Cabinet Secretariat Department's Additional Chief Secretary, Arvind Kumar Chaudhary pointed out that the cabinet approved an estimated cost of Rs 31.59 crore for the preparation of the Alternative Analysis Report (AAR) and Detailed Project Reports (DPRs) for all four proposed corridors. The National Capital Region Transport Corporation (NCRTC) will be carrying out the project.

Earlier, in April this year, the cabinet approved a Rs 680 crore project for setting up a corridor in Sonepur, modelled on the Kashi-Vishwanath corridor. This project is aimed at improving access to the Baba Hariharnath temple, expanding public spaces, and improving the scope for tourism. The Hariharnath temple, whose deity represents both Hari (Vishnu) and Har (Shiva) in a single shrine, is one of Bihar's most important pilgrimage sites, especially during Kartik Purnima and the Sonepur Mela. The Hariharnath corridor has become one of the flagship religious infrastructure projects of Choudhary's government.

Some of the other major road infrastructure projects are the Patna-Ara-Sasaram Road that will improve connectivity in western Bihar; the Ganga Path-style riverfront roads, inspired by the JP Ganga Path (Patna Marine Drive); and several other projects along the Ganga corridor that aim to improve urban mobility and draw tourists. The Road Construction Department (RCD) of Bihar is also focussing on the construction of new bridges and flyovers, particularly in congested urban areas.

The RCD's vision includes connecting all districts with better highways and ensuring that people from even the farthest locations can reach Patna within about five hours. Rural road connectivity is also being strengthened by creating all-weather roads and better links between rural areas and markets, schools, hospitals, and towns.

# Tourism

The Hariharnath corridor is just one of the many initiatives the State government has taken to boost tourism in the state. Since assuming office in April this year, Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary has announced several tourism-related initiatives, including improving connectivity and promoting religious and eco-tourism, which in turn have helped increase employment. Apart from the Baba Hariharnath temple, the government is investing in major pilgrimage destinations and developing infrastructure around important Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh pilgrimage circuits. It is developing Sitamarhi as a Ramayan Circuit destination and a major site for religious tourism. It is believed that Sita from the epic Ramayana was born here. After becoming Chief Minister, Choudhary has begun to improve the infrastructure around the Janaki Temple, Punaura Dham, and other Ramayana-related sites. The other important religious destinations identified by the state government in Sitamarhi include the Haleshwar Sthan and the Panth Pakar.

# Eco tourism

Eco-tourism is another thrust area for the Bihar government and it has already identified 50 new eco-tourism sites. While the

state government is building sustainable tourism infrastructure, it is also ensuring that improving visitor facilities does not come at the cost of conserving natural resources. The government hopes to generate around 20 lakh employment opportunities in the coming days through eco-tourism and related activities. One unique initiative by the Samrat Choudhary government to promote tourism is the Mukhya Mantri Bihar Heli-Tourism & Air Tourism Service Scheme, 2026, which will provide for helicopter and small aircraft services connecting major tourist destinations. This way, travel time is reduced and accessibility is enhanced, which in turn will attract domestic and international tourists.

The government's tourism strategy links tourism growth with job creation in hospitality and transport, promotion of handicrafts and local cuisine, rural development, and promotion of indigenous culture. All these factors lead to increased income opportunities for local communities. For this purpose, the government has emphasized the development of budget hotels and tourist accommodations, improvement of roads, sanitation, and visitor facilities. In its effort to brand Bihar as a leading tourism destination, Choudhary is encouraging private investment in the tourism sector. After becoming Chief Minister, he still retained the Tourism, Art and Culture Department under his direct charge, indicating that this particular department is one of the state's priority areas.

The state government has also taken a unique step by making tourism mandatory for government employees. State employees have been directed to undertake one village trip every three months to promote tourism within Bihar. This will open up new, lesser-known destinations and support local hotels, restaurants, transport providers, and artisans.

# Ensuring smooth governance

To ensure smooth and efficient governance, Choudhary launched a statewide public grievance redressal programme called Sahyog Shivir. The initiative, launched in May 2026, aims to bring government services to the village and ward levels so that citizens can resolve their problems without having to make repeated visits to government offices. Sahyog Shivirs, or assistance camps, are held on the first and third Tuesday of every month. Here, residents can submit applications and grievances related to ration cards and food security schemes, pensions and social welfare benefits, various certificates, including income, caste, and residence certificates; land records, mutation, and revenue matters. They can also bring local civic issues like drinking water problems, bad roads, etc., to the administration's notice.

The state government has provided a Sahyog portal and helpline (1100) for digital registration and updates on grievances. Living up to his promise of addressing the problems of the citizens quickly, Choudhary has insisted that the grievances have to be addressed within thirty days. The Chief Minister has even warned that delays without valid reasons could lead to action against the responsible officials. Further, to make life easier for the citizens and help them save time, the transport department of the government is expanding online services such as driving licence renewal, vehicle registration, tax payments, permit services, and others.

The Bihar government has launched a digital initiative for the convenience of senior citizens. Citizens aged 80 years or older will now be able to register land, plots, or flats without leaving their homes. Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary inaugurated the system - introduced by the Department of Prohibition, Excise, and

Registration at Hajipur registration office in Vaishali district. This facility has been launched under the 'Sabka Samman-Jeevan Aasaan (Ease of Leaving)' programme, part of the 'Saat Nischay-3 (Seven Resolves-3)' initiative.

The Samrat Choudhary government is also focusing on the law and order situation in Bihar and has adopted a zero-tolerance approach to crime. It has established a system to facilitate faster police response, accountability of officials, police modernisation, and stronger enforcement of criminal laws. Choudhary himself has directed police and district administrations to adopt a strict approach against serious crimes, corruption, and communal disturbances.

## Urban development

Right from the start, urban development has been a priority for the Samrat Choudhary government, with the administration focusing on planned urbanization, new townships, infrastructure financing, and improvements in civic services. The government has begun the process of creating 11 new satellite townships that will take the pressure off existing cities and promote planned urban growth. With modern road networks, parks and open spaces, affordable housing, commercial and institutional zones, and infrastructure for economically weaker sections (EWS), these new townships, which are being planned in Patna, Sonepur, Gaya, Darbhanga, Saharsa, Purnia, Munger, Muzaffarpur, Chhapra, Bhagalpur, and Sitamarhi, are expected to change the urban landscape of Bihar. The Cabinet has also approved the decision to raise about Rs 4,750 crore from the World Bank to strengthen urban infrastructure across the state.

Choudhary's government is committed to improve urban infrastructure, particularly in the areas of drinking water supply, underground sewerage, solid waste management, urban beautification, and digital municipal governance, and it is also encouraging urban expansion through scientific land-use planning and transit-oriented development.

Housing and transport are two key areas of focus for the Samrat Choudhary government. In order to integrate housing with transport and public utilities, the state government has been expanding the Metro rail service and has accelerated construction work on the Patna Metro. Expansion of the initial metro service network in Patna has already taken place. The Metro expansion will not only reduce traffic congestion in Patna but also provide faster public transport and improve overall urban mobility. The government also has plans to extend the Metro facilities in those urban centers that are poised for rapid development, including Gaya, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, and Bhagalpur.

## Transport

The government is aware that urban development cannot take place independent of the development of connectivity and transport,

and so it is not only expanding and strengthening the road network but also using technology to monitor road quality and undertake timely repairs. It is expanding and modernizing the public bus services through the Bihar State Road Transport Corporation (BSRTC) by providing more buses in major cities and expanding intercity and interstate bus routes; it is also promoting cleaner transport options through the use of electric buses. The transport department is actively supporting the use of electric vehicles (EVs) to reduce pollution and is providing all the necessary incentives and support to encourage the use of EVs.

In May this year, under the chairmanship of Samrat Choudhary, the Bihar government approved amendments to the Bihar Electric Vehicle (Amendment) Policy, 2026 to accelerate electric mobility. The aim of the government is that at least 30 per cent of all new vehicles either sold or registered in Bihar by 2030 should be electric vehicles. The policy provides financial support for different categories of electric vehicles - for example, a subsidy of Rs 1 lakh for an electric car registered in the name of a woman; assistance of Rs 10,000 for electric two-wheelers for general-category beneficiaries; and assistance of Rs 12,000 for SC/ST beneficiaries, among others. Electric vehicles registered in Bihar will also receive a 50 per cent rebate on motor vehicle tax.

## Energy

Within the first 100 days of becoming Chief Minister, Samrat Choudhary has made it clear that expansion in the energy sector will be one of the thrust areas of his government. His administration has not only been strengthening the power infrastructure and promoting renewable energy but also reducing the consumer burden and attracting investment in clean energy. Under the 'Bihar New & Renewable Energy Promotion Policy, 2025', the state has been encouraging investment in solar, battery storage, and other renewable energy projects. The policy framework aims to attract private and public investment in green energy projects. The state has already signed MoUs for the development of around 2,357 MW of green power projects.

While it has been promoting the use of solar energy through various means - including encouraging rooftop solar adoption, solar power for households and government buildings, and solar-based agricultural solutions - the state's Energy Department has been pursuing its long-term vision of increasing the renewable energy share and, at the same time, providing affordable and reliable electricity access. Through the Mukhyamantri Vidyut Upbhokta Sahayata Yojana, the state government has been extending financial support for electricity consumers through subsidy mechanisms.

With an eye to developing industry in the state, the government has been strengthening its power infrastructure by adding new power stations and bolstering the transmission and distribution networks. The expansion of the Nabinagar Super Thermal Power Project is aimed at increasing Bihar's power availability. The state has been placing particular importance on rural electrification, and one of its main priorities is ensuring dependable electricity in villages and providing separate agricultural feeders.

## Industry

The Samrat government's efforts in building up infrastructure in the state are also for the purpose of promoting industries and inviting investments in Bihar. It has created an investment-friendly ecosystem for accelerating industrial approvals, expanding industrial land availability, strengthening MSMEs, and promoting employment-generating sectors. Some of the main sectors the government is looking at are manufacturing, food processing, textile and leather, electronics, renewable energy, and biofuel industries. The government is working on setting out a new unified industrial policy, aimed at simplifying multiple sectoral policies into a single investment framework. Within just three months of becoming CM, Choudhary has announced the development of 11 mega industrial parks across

Bihar and a 50,000-acre industrial land bank to meet investor requirements.

Linked with the government's focus on industrial growth is the development of AI in the state. Under Samrat Choudhary, the Information Technology agenda has focused on AI adoption, digital governance, IT investment promotion, enhancing technology skills, and building Bihar as an emerging technology hub. It is the government's goal to position Bihar as an AI-enabled state.

## Education

पटना के 10 सरस्वती विद्या निकेतन विद्यालयों (मॉडल स्कूल)
में इंजीनियरिंग
एवं मेडिकल (NEET)
प्रवेश परीक्षा हेतु
अनुशिक्षण कार्य

Alongside its work on industrial and infrastructure development, the Samrat Choudhary government has been equally prioritizing social growth, and for that, it has focused on one of the most basic ingredients of social development - education. The state's thrust areas are improving the quality of government schools, expanding higher education access, strengthening teacher availability, regulating private education, and creating better learning infrastructure.

It has announced a series of measures to strengthen the education system, including the establishment of Sanskriti Vidyalayas or model schools in every block, the development of district-level schools, and the upgrading of one higher secondary school in every block into a model institution. The state government is also setting up degree colleges in blocks that currently lack higher educational institutions and exploring the possibility of expanding the education sector through Public-Private Partnership (PPP). Over the next five years, the government will be recruiting around one lakh teachers and has also introduced measures aimed at increasing transparency in private schools.

## Yoga

To ensure a healthy body along with a healthy mind, the state government has taken important steps to popularize yoga in the state. On International Day of Yoga 2026, Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary announced that yoga would be introduced into the curriculum of schools and colleges across Bihar from the next academic year to promote healthy lifestyles. He also pledged his support for Munger's yoga heritage when he visited the Bihar School of Yoga in Munger and met the spiritual leaders there. Munger is widely known as the "Yoga Nagri" (City of Yoga) because of the Bihar School of Yoga, founded by Swami Satyananda Saraswati in 1963.

If morning shows the day, then the first 100 days of Samrat Choudhary's rule are an indication of great developments in Bihar in the days to come.

Cover Story

# THE FRA PROMISE

▶ **A Soliga family** outside their traditional hut in the BR Hills in Karnataka. Wikipedia

Two decades after the Forest Rights Act became law, the record is uneven. While the law offers a democratic framework for forest governance, its transformative potential remains unrealised because of weak implementation and resistance from bureaucrats.

**Sharachchandra Lele**

Imagine that you were a Soliga Adivasi in the 1890s and living in the dense forests of Biligiri Rangana Hills of southern Karnataka. Your ancestors inhabited that entire region for millennia, living off the forest through trapping small animals, harvesting forest products, and shifting cultivation. Your community has divided the entire forest into clan regions and set up shrines in each of them. Your region, forest, livelihood, and culture are one inseparable whole.

One day the Madras Forest Department notifies the forests as "Reserved Forest" under the Madras Forest Act, a version of the Indian Forest Act, 1878. The notification claims to record the "rights" of all those dwelling in it. What are these rights so generously conceded and diligently recorded by the state? For each Soliga *podu* (hamlet), typically half/one acre of "village-site", quarter of an acre of "burial ground", "right of way" to the community's shrines, and the right to "collect water" from a water source. That's it! All you can then legally do is drink water, pray, sit in your hut, and die in your burial ground. No cultivation, no hunting, no collecting honey or *amla*, not even firewood, or grazing of cattle. If you do any of these, you are an "encroacher", a forest "offender", in land that you and your ancestors always knew as your own.

Such "settlement of rights", carried out under a law and hence implicitly seen as "fair", covers most of the country's forests and is at the heart of the "historic injustice" that the Forest Rights Act–the popular name for the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006–tries to correct. The FRA recognised, quite belatedly, what should have been obvious to independent India in 1947: that the Indian Forest Act is actually a *British* Indian Forest Act, passed by the British for

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the British. Just as the colonisers exploited settled agriculture by imposing exorbitant "*lagaan*" (tax, the theme of Aamir Khan's movie of the same name), they deprived the Adivasis and others by usurping ownership of the country's forests (and many other public resources) and converting these ecosystems into resources for timber and revenue. They not only exploited natural forests by extracting timber but also extensively cleared and replaced them with single-species plantations, or manipulated them to enable timber species to dominate. And they created the exploitative system of Forest Villages to carry out these activities.

**UNFORTUNATELY, INDEPENDENT** India did not correct the situation, and the 1878 (later 1927) Indian Forest Act, the ownership structure it created, and the forest department with its police powers and revenue orientation remained intact. When zamindari forests were "nationalised" by the state, or when "game reserves" of erstwhile princes were converted into "reserved forests", the approach was "take control first (in the name of the state)" and "worry later about who lives there and their rights". And if and when such "settlement of rights" happened, the colonial mindset of "everything belongs to the state unless proven otherwise" continued; "rights" were recognised on fixed agricultural plots but never on shifting cultivation landscapes, nor on the larger forests that were used daily by Adivasis and non-Adivasis. As every plan of the forest department across all States repeated itself ad nauseum, "there are no recorded rights, only concessions… which can be terminated at the will of the government". Indeed, the National Forest Policy of 1952 declared that "[t]he accident of a village being situated close to a forest does not prejudice the right of the country as whole to receive the benefits of a national asset". Empire-building was just replaced by nation-building.

Thus, India has the highest population of historically forest-dependent people (around 30 crore), but most have no rights recognised by modern law. Consequently, when forests are submerged by dams or handed out for mining projects, the "right-less" forest-dwellers get no compensation. When the Supreme Court mandates that a much higher "net present value" should be charged from the proponents of such "development" projects to compensate for the loss of the forest's public benefits, no share of this goes to those who suffer the biggest loss.

▼ **India has the** world's highest population of forest-dependent people. Here, women returning with *beedi* leaves from a forest in Madhya Pradesh.

VENKAT RAMANUJAM

**The FRA recognised, quite belatedly, what should have been obvious to independent India in 1947: that the Indian Forest Act is actually a *British* Indian Forest Act.**

**CONSERVATION PROJECTS** are no different: when BR Hills Wildlife Sanctuary was set up in 1974, no one asked whether the Soligas were willing to move out, let alone whether their relocation was needed to conserve wildlife. They were simply plucked out of their homeland and settled on its fringes in "colonies". Even today, when villages are "voluntarily" relocated from tiger reserves, the most generous compensation packages are silent on how the loss of forest (in material and cultural form) will be compensated for.

Indeed, governments in independent India nationalised even "minor" forest produce such as beedi leaves and sal seeds to maximise

**When BR Hills Wildlife Sanctuary was set up in 1974, no one asked whether the Soligas were willing to move out, let alone whether their relocation was needed to conserve wildlife.**

state revenues. They later set up "minor forest produce cooperatives", ostensibly to save poor, ignorant forest-dwellers from being exploited by middlemen. But these cooperatives are operated by forest departments or other state agencies. If they were inspired by the Amul model, the reality of these cooperatives is that members own neither the cow that produces the milk, nor the milk, nor the cooperative that sells it.

In short, forest governance remained a blind spot in independent India. The internationally acclaimed Chipko movement resulted in the tightening of felling regulations on the Himalayan slopes but not in the transfer of use and management of forest resources to local communities as the movement had demanded. "Joint forest management" programmes, packaged into "projects" funded on a vast scale by international aid agencies, became a three-legged walk of a giant (the department) and a dwarf (the village) that stumbled on both conservation and livelihoods. "Joint" management became co-optation, not decentralised decision-making focussed on local priorities.

**The Forest Rights Act** challenges this entire structure of top-down forest governance, beginning with the "illegality" of the forest-dwellers' presence but going far beyond. No doubt, the immediate trigger for the drafting of the FRA was a series of evictions of cultivators from forest department lands on the back of a deliberate misinterpretation of a Supreme Court order.

The biggest wave of evictions was in central India, the region whose predominantly Adivasi forest-dwellers are most marginalised and cultivation rights most poorly settled. But to think of the Act as "regularising forest encroachment" or, worse, as enabling "distribution of forest land for cultivation", which is how most hard-line foresters and conservationists characterise it, is to completely miss its point. The FRA is about *restoring* rights that *already* existed and were unfairly ignored or usurped, even while nesting them within environmental and democratic concerns, in a sequence of steps.

Firstly, the Act recognises forest-dwellers' right to continue living and cultivating in forests where they already existed in 2005, thereby putting an end to the massive tenurial insecurity and conflict they had long faced because their existence and livelihoods were never properly recognised. This right is called individual forest right, or IFR.

Secondly, and most importantly, the Act recognises that communities are "proprietors" (to use Elinor Ostrom's terminology) with rights to use and manage their community forest resources (CFRs) for their livelihoods but not to sell the land.

Thirdly, the Act seeks to abolish the oppressive system of Forest Villages where all developmental activities are controlled by the forest department. Finally, the legislation mandates that if communities are forest proprietors, they must have a say in all decisions about forests taken in the wider public interest, whether for conservation or economic development.

Such decentralisation is of course deeply

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upsetting for the forest officer trained in colonial tropes of forests as state property and villagers as interlopers to be controlled with police powers. Equally upset are those who believe that the hinterland must unquestioningly feed the country's economy with minerals, hydropower, or irrigation. But it can also be challenging for urban environmentalists such as this writer, brought up as we are in the narrative of forest ecosystems as providers of regional and national public goods, and therefore rightfully managed by hard-working forest officers on behalf of regional and national stakeholders.

However, the FRA does not reject wider environmental concerns or foreclose developmental possibilities. It only recognises that those who live in and around forests have the right to manage them on a daily basis; it also simultaneously spells out the responsibilities of conservation, sustainable use, and equity that must go with it.

While recognising customary rights, it insists on modern democratic institutions for collective decision-making. It allows for relocation of communities in the interests of wildlife, but as a last resort. And requiring communities' consent for developmental projects can force developmentalists to rethink the scale and form of their projects and to make the distribution of costs and benefits fairer. The FRA thus provides a remarkably balanced framework for sustainable, equitable, and democratic forest governance.

TWENTY YEARS AFTER its passage, what is the progress on FRA implementation? The complexity of issues that the FRA seeks to tackle and the vastness of the landscape of implementation make a simple answer impossible. On the whole, progress has been tardy, lopsided, and flawed. But there are also remarkable exceptions. To begin with, the overwhelming focus in most States has been on the recognition of individual habitation and cultivation rights, or IFRs. That is because the political system still understood the Act as "regularisation of encroachers", whom they saw as a vote bank. This also suited the typical mindset of bureaucrats: a "scheme" of "one-time handouts" to "beneficiaries".

**The FRA's win-win results for forests and people are already visible in pockets. Scaling them up to the whole country to enable a more effective and socially just form of forest management, restoration, and protection is the need of the hour.**

## Common myths about the FRA

**Myth:** The FRA proposes to hand out 4 hectares of forest to every Adivasi, leading to enormous deforestation.

**Fact:** The FRA only recognises individual forest rights (IFRs) over pre-existing cultivation, and only to the extent that was under cultivation before December 13, 2005, up to a maximum of 4 hectares. The law does not, therefore, "hand out" any standing forests for new cultivation at all.

**Myth:** Only people still living in forests can claim forest rights.

**Fact:** The law recognises rights of "forest-dwellers", a term the Union government has clarified is shorthand for any person living in or near a forest for whom forests are a primary source of livelihood. Community forest resources (CFR) rights are anyway recognised for entire Gram Sabhas.

**Myth:** Once the CFR right of a Gram Sabha is recognised, the forest department has no role, and no one can stop the Gram Sabha from destroying the forest or its wildlife.

**Fact:** The powers of the Gram Sabha need to be exercised in a manner that protects forests, wildlife, biodiversity, and water resources, while ensuring sustainable and equitable use. The forest department continues to perform important functions, such as protecting notified wildlife species, preventing illegal activities such as felling and poaching, and providing technical, financial, and protection support to Gram Sabhas.

**Myth:** The FRA does not allow any commercial use of forest resources.

**Fact:** The FRA allows rights-holders to sell "non-timber forest products", including a range of natural products collected from forests like fruits, seeds, leaves, and medicinal plants. This is one of the major income sources of most forest-dwellers. They may also undertake other sustainable livelihood activities, such as eco-tourism.

ATREE team

▼ **Villagers setting** out to patrol their CFR boundary in Dhudmaras, Chhattisgarh.

PHULSINGH NAG

This mindset has only strengthened in the last decade. The big push on IFRs has resulted in the recognition of over 22.4 lakh hectares of forest land where forest-dwellers can claim IFRs. This sounds like a lot, but what it means in terms of quantum of progress is unclear because there are no estimates of how much area *should* ultimately be recognised. A babble of contradictory narratives continues. Politicians from forested regions strike postures about the pain of forest-dwellers without digging deeper into which claims are rejected and why. Foresters point to post-2005 encroachments, without completing the recognition of pre-2005 claims. District Collectors and tribal department officials say they have done “enough”, without knowing the extent of pre-2005 cultivation; indeed many of them believe that they are “handing out” forests.

Meanwhile, across States, villagers complain, often with clear evidence, that the area recognised in their IFR title is only a part of what they were in fact cultivating in 2005. “Partial approval” qualifies as approval and flies under the political radar. Complete rejection of claims has attracted a court-mandated review, but this review has also been mechanical, not discriminating between minor failures of process, missing evidence, and clearly ineligible claims. Faced with the need to prove 75 years of forest dependence, interpreted variably on the ground, the non-STs are mostly disenfranchised, except where politically well organised.

**Among political representatives, there is virtually no one at the State level who understands CFR rights and is willing to lobby for them.**

**Maharashtra**

Recognised CFR rights over

**1,800**

hectares in 2009

**Chhattisgarh**

Recognised CFR rights in

**4,300**

villages in 2018

**Odisha**

Recognised CFR in

**3,400**

villages in 2018

OVERALL, WHILE THE conflict over land possession has certainly reduced in many places and IFR holders are actually getting the developmental support hitherto reserved for “regular” landholders, pockets of high conflict remain, and no closure seems to be on the horizon. Ham-handed attempts by the state to impose or clandestinely introduce satellite imagery to scrutinise claims rather than, as the Act says, to help gather evidence for the claimant, and knee-jerk rejection of such technology by grassroots groups, have stifled the opportunity to use technology in a transparent and people-friendly manner to facilitate such closure. The story of Forest Villages is no different.

The progress on implementing CFR rights is much tardier and also lopsided. Unlike IFRs, it is actually fairly easy to identify, from census data and maps, the villages that should get CFR rights (around 1,70,000 villages, excluding the north-eastern region and Jammu and Kashmir). It is even possible to estimate approximately how much land could be claimed as CFRs, using village and forest boundary maps and GIS software. Our analysis covering

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five central States suggests that 66 per cent to 90 per cent of all forest lands could come under community control.

In comparison, once one gets past the bloated numbers put out by the States, the recognition of CFR rights so far remains under 10 per cent of this potential and is extremely patchy. Maharashtra actually set the ball rolling back in 2009, recognising CFR rights over 1,800 hectares in Mendha Lekha village in Gadchiroli district. This was followed by a combination of bottom-up processes supported by grassroots groups and "mission-mode" implementation by the administration in many districts, resulting in about 6,000 villages receiving CFR titles so far.

Chhattisgarh and Odisha began much later (around 2018) but have recognised rights in 4,300 and 3,400 villages respectively, which is again only about one-third of what is potentially possible. A few other States (Gujarat, Jharkhand, and Karnataka) have done CFR rights recognition in a few pockets. But many other States with large forest areas and forest-dwelling populations–Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Telangana, Uttarakhand, and most of the north-eastern States–have zero implementation.

**THE REASONS ARE OBVIOUS.** First and foremost is the enormous resistance from foresters. Some of it stems from a genuine lack of understanding. A senior officer recently asked me: "Our Reserved Forest notifications say rights have been fully settled, so where is the question of recognising new rights?" The assumption seems to be that colonial period notifications are God's word, completely missing the point about historical injustice. But most often it is a conscious attempt to retain control over what they regard as their territory. No wonder retired forest service officers (along with some hard-line conservationists) filed court cases challenging the Act back in 2008 and are still campaigning assiduously against community rights of forest-dwellers on forests.

Second is the almost complete lack of understanding and empathy in the rest of the bureaucracy and political system about such rights and why they are about restructuring governance, not handouts. Even the tribal department is a "welfare" department, doling out scholarships, providing subsidies, and running schools, completely lacking in any vision about tribal empowerment and any empathy towards Adivasis or an understanding of their struggle for *jal-jangal-jameen* (water-forest-land).

Some IAS officers acknowledge that the zamindari of the foresters is harmful, but their tenures as Collectors are transient and they are increasingly under pressure from above to push through "development" projects rapidly.

Among political representatives, there is virtually no one at the State level who understands CFR rights and is willing to lobby for them. Perhaps this is because CFR rights would increase village resources, reducing their dependence on handouts from the state. Certainly, at the district and sub-district level, the elected representatives on the claim-approving committees neither know nor get any respect from the officers on the committee. The judiciary has been equally guilty, mostly ignoring the FRA and still seeing the forest through the urban environmental lens alone. In spite of these major constraints, the past

**Among political representatives, there is virtually no one at the State level who understands CFR rights and is willing to lobby for them.**

**The FRA process** at work: A Gram Sabha approving IFR claims of a Forest Village.
MOHIT MAHAJAN

two decades have generated ample evidence of the transformative potential of CFR rights.

More than a thousand villages in Maharashtra are enhancing their incomes by selling minor forest products like beedi leaves and bamboo, by themselves or through their federations. Mendha Lekha, Pachgaon, Payvihir, and Korchi Mahagramsabha from eastern Maharashtra have become household names in this sector.

Payvihir's work on forest restoration in a denuded landscape has won awards. Pachgaon has been earning lakhs of rupees from bamboo sale for more than 10 years. Villages inside the Shoolpaneshwar sanctuary in Gujarat have not only earned income from the sale of dried bamboo but also incorporated wildlife conservation strategies into their CFR management plans. Villages in Chhattisgarh began late, but they are innovating through award-winning eco-tourism, edible mahua flowers, and collective sal seed sales. Hundreds of communities are protecting their forests by patrolling them for free. Gram Sabhas meet to arrive at most relevant decisions. Democratic forests are indeed a win-win for livelihoods and conservation.

**MUCH OF THE CREDIT** goes to committed grassroots groups that have worked closely with the villages. Credit also goes to the Maharashtra government for supporting the process financially and through policy changes in a variety of ways, not least by liberalising the hitherto monopsonistic beedi leaf market, allowing villages to issue transit passes for forest produce.

Where do we go from here? Implementation has proceeded slowly or languished for far too long. Bringing early closure to the festering IFRs issue, liberating Forest Villages, and fully recognising CFR rights are essential. Rapid and accurate rights recognition is feasible, but it requires understanding locally specific community forest geographies, public sharing of all records, and use of transparent and people-friendly technology. This will enable us to focus on the bigger task of enabling communities to become true managers of the forest.

Following and going beyond Maharashtra's initiatives, a rollback of state monopolies in marketing, and ensuring technical and protection support and a mandated share in restoration funds to villages will be crucial. Wildlife-rich areas must be governed as "co-existence and co-management landscapes", with communities owning all tourism enterprises. Ultimately, revamping the colonial-era Indian Forest Act and harmonising other laws with the FRA's idea of bottom-up forest governance will be essential.

**INDIA IS NOT** the first country to restore the rights of indigenous or forest-dependent communities over their community resources and reap its benefits. Mexico did it in the 1930s. Nepal reversed its nationalisation of forests by passing a Community Forestry Act in 1993. And the results are for everyone to see: the Mexican *ejidos* are forested and productive; Nepal's forests have regenerated very substantially.

Alienating people from their ancestral landscapes is not only bizarre and impractical in such a prehistorically and densely peopled landscape, it also causes forest degradation, and conflict.

The FRA's win-win results for forests and people are already visible in pockets. Scaling them up to the whole country to enable a more effective and socially just form of forest management, restoration, and protection is the need of the hour, especially in times of rising climate risk and environmental degradation. ■

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# TAKES TWO TO TANGO

While government records boast large numbers of recognised “community rights” titles, the reality on the ground tells a different story. For the FRA to truly succeed, what is required is a hybrid approach, one that blends community-led legitimacy with administrative support and clear timelines.

**SHRUTI MOKASHI** AND **SHARACHCHANDRA LELE**

Three years ago, one morning, we set out before dawn from Jagdalpur for Kawapal, a village nestled inside the vast forests of south-east Bastar district in Chhattisgarh. By the time we reached Kawapal, darkness had dissolved into a lighter shade of violet. People had started gathering in the open space near the village centre, preparing to conduct the GPS boundary demarcation of their large customary forest. Walking the entire boundary in a day required this early start.

The group, including village elders, young people, and the pujari, proceeded towards the boundary of the village where we were joined by a few folks from the neighbouring village. At a designated spot, a few young people and field coordinators from the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment turned on GPS tracking on Aamcho CFR Mapping, a mobile-based app to map community forest resources (CFRs). We returned to Kawapal late evening, having walked more than 28 km through dense forest and streams, encompassing 3,833 hectares of customary forest. We had completed just one of the steps in the often challenging process of claiming CFR rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006!

Why must communities use a GPS and jump through other hoops to map and claim their forest rights? Why can the government not identify these rights and grant CFR titles? Our broader action-cum-research throws some light on these questions.

In India, as per government records, 1,24,161 “community rights” titles have been recognised in all, over an area of 74,019 sq km until now. But this big number presents a highly misleading picture vis-a-vis the progress in recognising CFR rights, that is, the rights to use and manage entire customary forests.

For instance, Chhattisgarh reports having distributed 52,000 CFR rights titles, and Madhya Pradesh almost 28,000. These numbers do not stand up to scrutiny. Chhattisgarh has only around 12,000 villages in the vicinity of forests. In a bid to showcase itself as a front-runner in forest rights implementation, however, the State had distributed five to six titles per village. Many of these rights are irrelevant for wider forest governance. They are either rights to continue existing non-forest use

in tiny parcels of land, such as shrines, playgrounds, and burial grounds, or they are multiple titles representing different forms of use—grazing, firewood collection, or minor forest produce collection—in the same forest patch. Effectively, the actual number of villages with recognised CFR rights in Chhattisgarh is only around 4,300, and in Madhya Pradesh, just 4! The government has propped up the numbers and diverted attention from the non-recognition of vital CFR rights.

In theory, CFR rights are to be claimed bottom-up by Gram Sabhas. Claim-making is not meant to be complicated. Indeed, the first CFR rights title was recognised in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra on the basis of a simple two-page application by the Gram Sabha asking the Collector to refer to appropriate government records and identify the extent of their rights. In 2012, a specific form for claiming CFR rights was introduced, wherein villages were asked to attach a (hand-drawn) map of CFRs with some evidence of traditional use or access. Chhattisgarh produced an elaborate "manual" with pro formas for every step. The process of submitting a claim for CFR rights, thus, became complex, especially for semi-literate and socially marginalised villagers whose native tongue may differ from even the State language. It is then the case that bottom-up claim-making happens only where support from civil society organisations (CSOs) is available. Although the law obligates the administration to extend assistance, in practice, this rarely happens.

▼
**Adivasi women** on their way to collect firewood, at Jawanga village, Chhattisgarh, on October 25, 2018.
SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

**The administration usually insists that villagers indicate which revenue and forest department parcels the customary forest contains. But they do not share their boundary maps with villagers.**

PERHAPS THE BIGGEST hurdle in the process of claim-making is making customary boundaries "legible" to the state. A CFR is the forest that falls within the customary boundary of the village. But the administration does not understand customary boundaries. Even within the administration, there is a rift: revenue department officials only under-

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stand revenue boundaries, while forest department officials only understand forest compartment boundaries. Neither sees an overlay of both.

Although not mandatory in the claim form, the administration usually insists that villagers indicate which revenue and forest department parcels the customary forest contains. But they do not share their boundary maps with villagers. Communities and organisations, thus, lack both awareness of administrative boundaries and access to the administrative boundary maps.

To overcome these bottlenecks, we developed a pair of free technologies. First, we built a bilingual (English/Hindi) webGIS portal for central States, allowing everyone to see official revenue and forest department boundaries (red and green, respectively, in the figures) on a Google Earth satellite image.

This helps villagers, CSO workers, and front-line government officials understand how the terrain around the village is delineated by the two departments. It helps in getting rid of some misconceptions among citizens and officials alike, including that land is either revenue land or forest land, and never both.

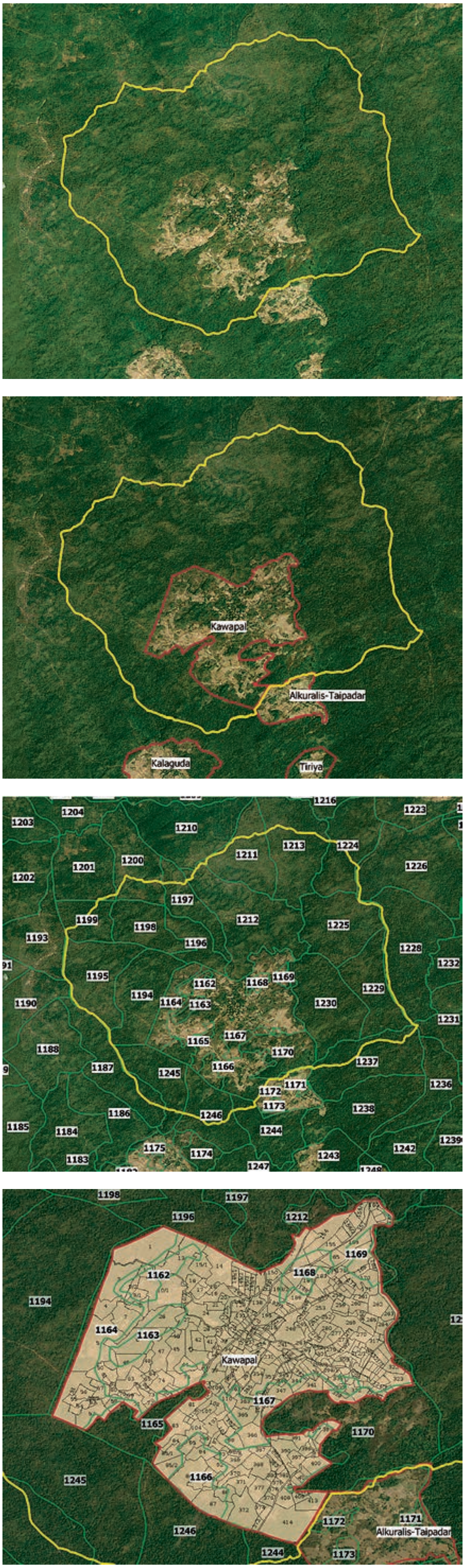
As the figures show, forest compartments (green lines) can be notified inside the revenue boundary (red line) of a village on revenue parcels as well. Some forests may have revenue parcel numbers, but they may not be notified by the forest department (see 45, 372, or 414 in the close-up figure). And of course, there is a large forest area outside the revenue boundary of the village—a peculiarity of colonial boundary creation in the heavily forested tracts of the erstwhile Central Provinces. When we used this webGIS in our training programmes, many front-line officials said that they were seeing the two maps together for the first time!

Second, we created a free smartphone app—Aamcho CFR Mapping—which is bilingual (English/Hindi) and can be used to create a GPS-based polygon of any patch by walking its boundary. Users can even see the administrative boundaries displayed on the webGIS on the app, and see their route vis-a-vis those boundaries. They can save the GPS-ed boundaries on their phones and share them easily.

In the past, communities depended heavily on the forest department for GPS mapping; they would not know how the map actually turned out, and the GPS data would either be lost or remain with the department. Our technology ensures that villagers become the mappers and owners of the CFR boundaries: they can see government boundaries, map their own, and re-

▼ **Villagers of Kawapal** walking the boundary of their customary forest with a mobile-based GPS app.
HRITIK BHATNAGAR

**The majority of the approximately 4,300 CFR rights titles recognised in Chhattisgarh are faulty, not only because communities were not involved in the process but also because the outcomes are glaringly erroneous.**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▶ **GPS-tracked customary boundary** of Kawapal village (yellow), overlaid with revenue boundary (red), forest compartment boundary (green), and revenue parcels (pale brown). BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

tain that data for use in their claims. People-friendly geospatial technology, thus, bridges the gaps between the state and the community, in addition to the gaps between government departments themselves.

The bottom-up approach to forest right claims has undeniable strengths: it ensures community ownership from day one and produces accurate titles. However, it is slow and limited in its reach because it demands extensive CSO hand-holding. Moreover, even when villages painstakingly prepare their claim documents and submit them to the authorities, the process often gets stalled at the block or district level. Officials are under no obligation to act within a fixed time frame. CFR rights claims of villages in Madhya Pradesh have been pending for more than two years.

W**HILE LACK OF POLITICAL** will and obstruction by forest departments are the main reasons, complex claim-making procedures also reduce the speed of titling even when the state is actually willing to implement the Act. This has given rise to a mission-mode approach among some administrators, with very mixed outcomes. Collectors in eastern Maharashtra pioneered this approach for CFR rights implementation, taking advantage of the administrative geography of community forests there. In many parts of this region, the so-called revenue boundaries of the villages match their customary boundaries and so include the entire customary forest. Moreover, the colonial administration had even issued *nistar patraks* to each village, documenting rights in each forested revenue parcel within the revenue boundary. So, the Collectors simply tasked village-level officials with filling claim forms with the list of revenue parcels as documented in the *nistar patraks* and approved them. At least in Gadchiroli, Chandrapur, and Yavatmal districts, CFR rights recognition has been completed for all eligible villages using this approach.

But the approach also has multiple downsides. Villages are often clueless about their rights having been recognised and remain unaware of the forest area over which they have these rights. So, titles are unlikely to translate into actual community-led forest management. More importantly, this *nistar patrak*-based method limits rights to revenue boundaries, leading to significant under-recognition of rights in villages where the customary boundary

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श्रमजीवी
संघटना
झिंदाबाद

▼ **Members of Shramjivi Sanghatna** along with Adivasis from Yeoor, Maharashtra, demanding that the forest department mark the boundaries of their agricultural lands, on December 10, 2019.
VIBHAV BIRWATKAR

extends beyond the revenue boundary of the village, as in the case of Kawapal. If Kawapal is blindly assigned rights over only the forests within its revenue boundary, it would be a huge injustice.

Finally, mission-mode approaches can be totally divorced from the geography of the community forest, as has happened in Chhattisgarh. Under pressure from a well-meaning Chief Minister, the task of the rapid "creation" of CFR rights claims fell on the forest department, which only knows forest compartments. It, then, simply filled in the numbers of some compartments in the vicinity of the settlement. As a result, we found that the majority of the approximately 4,300 CFR rights titles recognised in Chhattisgarh are faulty, not only because communities were not involved in the process but also because the outcomes are glaringly erroneous: forests completely separated from the village have been included; forests within the revenue boundary have been left out; compartments shared by two villages have been assigned to one, leading to conflicts; and so on.

While the urgency to complete the long-delayed recognition of CFR rights is real, the experience of the past 20 years suggests the need for a careful balance between bottom-up and top-down approaches.

First, of course, is the need to create awareness in forest-adjacent villages about CFR rights, build partnership with CSOs and community groups, and provide facilitation and training support to help realise these rights. Second is the urgent need to open up access to all data on administrative boundaries and to proactively make these available through people-friendly technology (as supporting tools, not mandated channels). Third is the need to share all government records, including revenue records (such as *nistar patraks*) and forest records (such as areas assigned for beedi leaf collection), in the public domain. Fourth, the administration itself needs to understand the geography of these rights to avoid errors in titling.

Kawapal, and countless other villages across India, continue to wait for their community forest rights to be recognised. Their patience is a testament to resilience, but their struggle is also a reminder of how far the system still has to go. Moving forward requires a hybrid approach, one that blends community-led legitimacy with administrative support and clear timelines. Only then can forest rights be acknowledged both accurately and efficiently, while safeguarding participation and justice. ■

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# BACK TO THE ROOTS

Gram sabhas demonstrate that everyday knowledge of the forest yields better outcomes than top-down ideas driven by a government-knows-best attitude. **ANUJA DATE**

“It may have happened in the past but not this year or the next. We resolve that no trees will be cut from our shared community forests, neither for the Dasara festival in Jagdalpur nor for coupe felling under the Working Plan of the forest department. Hereon, we will protect and grow our forests for our needs.”

Echoing these words of elders in the village of Tiriya, who recognised the deteriorating forest cover, many gram sabhas in Bastar, Chhattisgarh, have taken a collective decision to break away from contributing wood to the construction of a ritual rath (chariot) for the annual Dasara festival. Some gram sabhas, overcoming the fear of police cases, have prohibited the forest department from enter-

▶ **Volunteers preparing** soil for native tree plantation as part of CFR management in Kamdeo Kurushpal in Bastar, Chhattisgarh. RUPCHAND NAG

▶ **Collecting and drying** mahua flowers on green nets in a village in Bastar, Chhattisgarh. YASHASHREE GARGE

ing their recognised community forest resource (CFR) areas for felling timber.

What is perhaps seen as a confrontation with both tradition and the state is actually an environmentally oriented democratic assertion of their rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006. Since the first CFR title was issued to the gram sabha of Mendha Lekha in Maharashtra in 2009, thousands of gram sabhas are actively taking steps towards managing their community forests to increase local livelihoods and ensure conservation.

How has this process of forest management unfolded? What challenges lie ahead, and how can they be overcome?

**IN SEVERAL FORESTED** parts of central India, a quiet transformation is taking shape. Kamdeo Kurushpal, a gram sabha in Bastar, spent a year in a gradual, collectively funded process of preparing forest maps, conducting forest walks to assess conditions, and holding multiple rounds of meetings to draft a simple, locally relevant management plan.

The gram sabha met once a month in the late evenings to get updates from its "Community Forest Management Committee" and to make decisions. Sitting by the fire, men, women, and children held long discussions about what it meant to finally decide the fate of their forest by themselves.

"Our village has more than 160 hectares of forest, but so much of it has plantations of acacia and eucalyptus made by the forest department. Even within these plantations, we recorded the invasive lantana. We cannot use any of these to collect produce like fruits, leaves, mushrooms, flowers, or bamboo," noted the gram sabha adhyaksha (president). "But there is one patch of forest that is completely barren, and if we put efforts, we can revive it. We can plant sal, mahua, and so many more trees that matter to us."

What followed was a 3 hectare plantation of more than 700 saplings, with survival rates higher than those usually achieved by large-scale plantation drives. The gram sabha, supported by a small contribution for watering facilities from the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment through corporate social responsibility funds, monitored, fertilised, and protected the plantation through voluntary work.

Getting more than 80 Adivasi, largely agrarian, and below poverty line households engaged in voluntary work for two years is no easy task. The gram sabha's dedication was built on a strong foundation of understanding the relevance of the CFR title, of the autonomy it bestows, and a conviction that their lost forest-based economy and culture would eventually thrive.

Overcoming internal differences in power owing to caste, gender, or political affiliations, the gram sabha continues to work towards community forest management.

In the quiet hours of the night, 60 households and our team waited with bated breath for the safe passage of 2 tonnes of sweet, net-dried, food-grade mahua flowers collected from the forests of Bastar that were being sent to a company in Jharkhand.

*Mahua flowers and seeds are officially classified as minor forest produce. In Chhattisgarh, close to 5 lakh quintals of mahua flowers are collected annually.*

At a basic level, it meant that the two-month-long race to cleanly harvest, dry, and pack and collectively sell food-grade mahua against an early flowering season and untimely summer rains would finally yield a profitable result. At the level of asserting rights, though, it signified that letters issued by the gram sabhas authorising both the collection and sale of forest produce under the FRA were seen as legitimate by the numerous forest department checkposts along the way.

Demonstrating increased returns through sale of food-grade mahua, yielding twice the market price, was a step towards building a

rights-based forest economy anchored and led by gram sabhas.

This was one among several experiments in forests in central India where hundreds of gram sabhas are attempting various strategies to derive livelihood benefits from community forest resources. Whether it is the notable Gram Sabha Federations across Vidarbha collectively selling tendu (beedi) leaves or those managing the sale of bamboo, favourable policy conditions that support autonomy result in a multitude of local benefits. For example, gram sabhas have invested profits from the sale of non-timber forest produce in improving the quality of water resources, school infrastructure, and forest protection.

For generations, forest-dependent communities saw the enormous wealth of forest produce locked away by the opaque management of state-led cooperatives and other institutions. The system also suffered from restricted purchases under minimum support prices and delayed payments.

The FRA has broken these chains and empowered communities to set up alternative forest-based enterprises for collecting and marketing forest produce for much higher local gains.

However, the government must further support these communities by rewriting obsolete laws controlling forest products such as tendu leaves, sal seeds, gums, and resins, as per the FRA. Also, state-led cooperatives, Van Dhan Vikas Kendras, and other non-timber forest product institutions should be revamped to incorporate and give primacy to gram sabhas by diverting capital investment and working funds to the sabha accounts.

**Apart from gaining place-based knowledge of plants and animals, gram sabha members have developed a keen understanding of forests while working as labour for the forest department.**

**THE SUCCESS STORIES** of gram sabhas are islands in a sea of stasis. Numerous gram sabhas are taking steps in forest management without access to enough financial support. India's forests bear the imprint of years of timber felling, invasive species, plantations, unregulated harvest, and climate change. The ecological challenges are enormous.

Restoring forests for supporting the multiple livelihood needs, reviving biodiversity, and banking carbon require continuous, assured, and systematic investment. The FRA rules, too, recognise this need for investment and place that responsibility on the government.

The Maharashtra government initiated a scheme for supporting gram sabhas through civil society organisations as early as 2013. It went further by allowing CFR gram sabhas to anchor forest management works under the MGNREGA. Although implementation is restricted to a few pockets and projects are often force-fitted into existing State schemes, there is evidence of success in delivering livelihood benefits to forest rights holders.

In Chhattisgarh, some gram sabhas received a one-time investment of Rs.50,000 under the constitutional grants-in-aid for tribal welfare, and the impact has been significant.

Under the Centre's flagship Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gramin Utkarsh Abhiyan, 1,000 select CFR gram sabhas can each potentially get up to Rs.15 lakh for restoration works over 100 hectares.

However, these allocations pale in front of the expenditure of forest departments on afforestation programmes. For example, under the Green India Mission, the Central government

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has allocated almost Rs.1 lakh per hectare annually for 10 years.

Similarly, when one looks at allocations for compensatory afforestation (in lieu of diverted forest land), forest departments demand around Rs.12 lakh per hectare annually over 10 years. Crores of rupees still get pumped into forest department-controlled Joint Forest Management Committees despite the FRA making the programme redundant where CFR management committees have been established.

A **COMMONLY CITED** reason for the state's hesitation in investing in gram sabhas is their supposed lack of institutional capacity or knowledge to manage forests. Is this caution justified?

While walking the CFR boundary of Bodena village in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, an elderly man said: "We planted pongamia trees here on the forest department's advice during joint forest management. It's been more than 15-20 years, and while you may find a tree or two, others simply died. We strongly feel that we should have planted trees like garadi or even dudhia for a better success rate."

Apart from gaining place-based knowledge of plants, animals, and their interrelationships while growing up in forested areas, gram sabha members have developed a keen understanding of forests while working as labour for the forest department. Many of them are conversant with practices of forestry and watershed development, along with their own observational understanding of their ecosystems.

As gram sabhas engage in CFR management, there is an opportunity to bring in this amalgamated knowledge and experience. Yet, a common experience is that CFR gram sabhas encounter a continuous, systematic challenge from government officials questioning this very knowledge.

The forest bureaucracy often ignores the mounting evidence from across the world and India that communities can not only plan and implement locally relevant resource management activities but often do it better than centralised and bureaucratic agencies.

The burden of expertise and the notion of "scientificness" being an exclusive territory of the forestry specialists is borne even by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, which seems to flip-flop on its duty to implement the FRA in its true spirit. In 2024, it issued an advisory jointly with the Environment Ministry wherein they stated that CFR management plans should be in consonance with the National Working Plan Code (NWPC) 2023, the guidance document to prepare official working plans. While sidelining the question whether the NWPC has guidance relevant for decentralised, multi-objective forest management, it served as a smokescreen to reinforce the forest bureaucracy's role, in violation of the gram sabhas' authority provided in the FRA.

**Hundreds of gram sabhas are attempting various strategies for deriving livelihood benefits from community forest resources.**

This problematic advisory led to ground-level overreach when the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests of Chhattisgarh issued a letter that forest management must continue as per the department's "scientific methods" until the government prepares model plans for CFR management.

Although the letter was revoked after the Ministry of Tribal Affairs intervened, following a Statewide mobilisation by gram sabhas, larger questions of gram sabha autonomy remain.

T**HE PROMISE OF** the FRA was rooted in rights recognition, and wherever it has been implemented it has revealed a far larger impact. In a world afflicted by rising individualism, gram sabhas—strengthened by the CFR provision—still demonstrate the immense power of the collective.

A woman leader from Gadchiroli drew on ideas of care and belonging while reminding us why rights for gram sabhas mattered. She said: "How do we see this forest? We walk in it, collect things from it, and we know it. And what about them [forest department]? They see it from above [satellites], from far away."

With a common purpose of building livelihoods through forest management, gram sabhas are showing that better outcomes are possible through the everyday knowledge of the forest than top-down mechanisms.

There is little doubt that for the sustainability of India's forests, structural changes supportive of CFR gram sabhas are necessary. Only by trusting the people who have protected India's forests for generations can we achieve a truly sustainable and equitable future for its forest wealth. ■

Anuja Date is a postdoctoral research associate with the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment.

Cover Story

# THE GOVERNANCE, RIGHTS FACE-OFF

▼ **A tribal boy** sitting on a stone seat in a village in Odisha's Malkangiri district. These stone seats serve as spaces for community elders to converse and pass the time of day.

BISWARANJAN ROUT

Between paper and forest floor, an entrenched bureaucracy, aided by an indifferent political class, has managed to subvert the FRA's most radical promise of genuinely democratic, grassroots governance of forests. **GAUTAM AREDATH**

India's forests mean many things to many people. To a conservationist, they may be a tiger's range. At climate summits, they are carbon sinks aiding emissions targets. To a mining company, they may overlie seams of ore. To a restoration practitioner, they are mosaics of ecosystems and stakeholders needing some desired optimum. To many a social activist, the largely forested, Adivasi-majority Scheduled Areas hold out a different, bottom-up vision of governance. To the village community that has lived there for generations, it may be any or none of these things but certainly something more: a place of livelihood, worship, and belonging.

Forest governance is about balancing between these competing demands, and any decision about forest use—how and for whom it should be managed, or whether it should remain a forest at all—is simultaneously a decision about whose interests count. Until the Forest Rights Act (FRA) arrived in 2006, those decisions consistently sidelined forest-dwellers almost entirely because the Indian state perpetuated, not reversed, their dispossession that began under colonial rule.

A stocktake of the FRA is incomplete without asking whether it has altered, or even tempered, the state structures that produce this injustice. On paper, it would seem so. Gram Sabhas' community forest resource (CFR) rights reinstate customary management and place it at the centre of forest governance. But the FRA does not operate in a vacuum, and whether its promise has been realised depends on how these powers are exercised alongside other laws and institutions. The story so far is of a new legal imagination trapped inside an old administrative order.

The colonial Indian Forest Act, 1927, began the appropriation of forests by classifying them into categories such as reserved and protected forests. When the FRA redistributes authority over forests, it logically requires redrawing the old maps. Statutory guidelines issued under the FRA more than a decade ago say as much, prescribing a new category of "CFR forests". More than 33 lakh hectares of forest land are now legally under the management of Gram Sabhas, but land records have not moved an inch.

This is not a mere technicality. Without any marker distinguishing CFR areas, forest departments carry on as though they still have exclusive control over all forests, applying their official working plans to land over which they no longer have management authority—and continuing to draw the full public funding for forest management without passing any share to Gram Sabhas. For instance, afforestation projects never seek a Gram Sabha's approval, not because it would necessarily say no but because the administrative culture refuses to acknowledge the need to do so.

**THIS CONTRADICTION IS** the sharpest wherever forests continue to generate timber revenue for the state. Across most of central India, large forest tracts are designated for timber felling, either directly by the forest department or through leases. Rights recognition is frequently resisted (and in Chhattisgarh's Mohla Manpur, recognised rights were illegally withdrawn) in these forests on the grounds that communities have not "*been* traditionally protecting and conserving" them or that recognition would violate the leases. Neither argument can survive a reading of the FRA, but in practice they do. CFR rights apply over "customary" forests, from which communities were historically dispossessed and their customary practices prevented, if not criminalised, by earlier laws. To compel the impossible is to defeat the law's purpose. Equally, rights are conferred free of all encumbrances and would override a lease.

In Chhattisgarh's Kanker district, a Gram Sabha passed a resolution halting timber felling in its CFR forest, and the District Collector, rightly, instructed the forest department to stop. The Divisional Forest Officer responded that it must continue because it was required by the working plan, a laughable idea because the FRA clearly says that those plans must be modified on the basis of Gram Sabhas' own management plans. Yet, across the few thousand villages that have prepared such plans, the official ones remain untouched.

There is also a practical problem here, which the FRA has not resolved. Working plans are approved by the Union government, a process devised at the Supreme Court's insistence to regulate timber extraction. Requiring such approval for thousands of village-level plans would overwhelm administrative capacity while serving little purpose. CFR plans cannot authorise timber felling anyway, and the local problems and solutions they address are likely to be inscrutable to a distant official used to the templated official plans spanning district-sized areas. Rather than resolve the confusion, the forest bureaucracy has simply clung to the old order.

**CFR rights apply over "customary" forests, from which communities were historically dispossessed and their customary practices prevented, if not criminalised, by earlier laws.**

In conservation-priority areas, the FRA challenges the long-standing assumption in law, embodied in the Wild Life (Protection) Act (WLPA), 1972, that protecting wildlife necessarily requires removing people. The FRA does not deny that human use and wildlife conservation can conflict, but it does not take it for granted either. Instead, it subjects relocation, which was once a routine administrative decision sprung on villages without reason or question, to legal safeguards. Under the FRA, a critical wildlife habitat, an "inviolate" area from which people must be relocated, cannot be declared unless rights are recognised and site-specific studies show that human-wildlife coexistence is impossible. By implication, villages should get to manage the forest themselves first since any conflict may owe as much to the state's past management as to community use.

While the FRA was being legislated, the WLPA was amended in 2006 to include a near-identical provision for declaring critical tiger habitats (CTH). Tiger reserves, by law, comprise a core, or CTH–which, subject to FRA-like safeguards, must be kept as "inviolate" for conservation purposes–and an adjoining buffer where

wildlife can coexist with ordinary forest and farm-based livelihoods. The provisions have proved to be paper tigers, even as the number of tiger reserves have more than doubled since 2006. Forest departments across the country have pressed on with relocations from both cores and buffers, violating the FRA and the WLPA alike by stalling rights recognition, denying basic services like road maintenance, all the while claiming that the relocations are "voluntary".

THE NATIONAL TIGER Conservation Authority, on its part, urges States to expedite the so-called voluntary relocations by offering standard packages that resemble sops more than legal entitlements, but it never asks if the law is being complied with. In 2024, the Madhya Pradesh High Court, in *Kamlesh Prajapati v. State of Madhya Pradesh*, held that consent to relocation obtained through such packages was invalid due to undue influence—pressure exerted through the government's dominant position. However, similar relocations have continued elsewhere.

Consider Madhya Pradesh's Rani Durgavati Tiger Reserve, notified in September 2023. Of the 93 villages that fell within its boundary, 42 had already been relocated between 2014 and 2023. Several more relocations are being pursued, in core and buffer, and any village not targeted yet has been saved only by budget constraints, as forest officials have admitted. Villagers here, however, say their rights claims were arbitrarily denied and that they were pressed to leave regardless. That not one CFR right has been recognised in the landscape exposes the complete absence of accountability. The complaints were serious enough for the Ministry of Tribal Affairs to write to the State government, asking it to investigate. Little has come of it beyond a telling image: the ministry entrusted by Parliament with guarding the FRA reduced to writing letters that the State government is free to ignore.

On the other hand, in tiger reserves such as Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple, Achanakmar, and Similipal, where CFR rights have been recognised, including in CTHs, tiger populations have remained stable or grown in spite of continued

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**People from tribal villages** fishing in rainwater flowing from the Eastern Ghats at Kasipatnam in Visakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh, a file photograph.
K.R. DEEPAK

**Continued on page 37** ▶

# From British Raj to zamindari state

Bureaucratic indifference, coupled with the idea of "losing forest land", has meant that States have hardly pushed to implement provisions of the FRA that would have enabled conversion of colonial-era Forest Villages into Revenue Villages.

"If you were posted as a guard in a Forest Village, your life was made!"–retired forest officer, Burhanpur (Madhya Pradesh)

The term "forest village" sounds innocuous, like a village located deep inside a beautiful forest. But "Forest Village" represents, perhaps, the most extreme form of injustice perpetrated by colonial forest policy. It was a special type of village, created by the forest department, for the purpose of "securing labour" for forestry operations. Land was carved out of Reserved Forests and plots were given on temporary leases to households, preferably of Adivasis who were willing to settle and cultivate in return for compulsory supply of labour for forestry operations. Those who did not provide labour were evicted.

Thus, Adivasis whose lands were taken over were now "allowed" to cultivate if they helped exploit their forest for the British Crown. The forest guard was the department's representative who lorded over the village, as evident in the quote above. Over time, population and cultivation expanded, and while cultivation was informally permitted, leases were not modified to reflect the larger area.

At Independence, there were about 5,000 such villages dotting India's forests, and colonial "Forest Village Rules" were simply copied into state forest manuals. While the zamindari system was abolished elsewhere and tenants got permanent rights, state zamindari continued in Forest Villages with no such rights for its tenants. Even when the state pushed for rural development, activities in Forest Villages were designed and executed by the forest department. Committee after committee recommended abolishing this system and converting Forest Villages to Revenue (regular) Villages. But only one or two States (prominently, Maharashtra) did so.

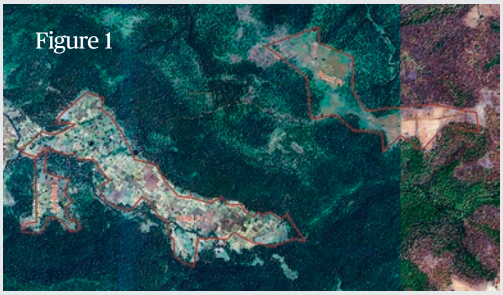
The Forest Conservation Act of 1980 further added an obstacle: converting the village meant "de-reserving" all of its land, which now required Central approval. Yet, the Central government itself laid down guidelines in 1990 to enable this. When Madhya Pradesh finally tried to do so in 2001, however, the Supreme Court came in the way, baulking at the idea of "losing forest" even though forests had been under officially sponsored cultivation for many decades!

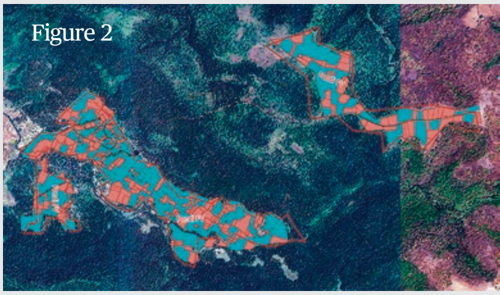
Recognising this injustice, the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA), says such conversion is the "right" of forest-dwellers. But the intricacies of law, the shadow of the Supreme Court, and the sheer indifference (or zamindari attitude) of the bureaucracy meant that, in the 20 years of FRA, only Chhattisgarh and, to some extent, West Bengal and Odisha have used this provision, albeit without completing the processes as yet. Madhya Pradesh, the State with the largest number of Forest Villages (925), made no effort at all until 2022. Individual Forest Rights (IFR) recognitions in Madhya Pradesh happened completely arbitrarily: in some districts, only those with the original leases got IFR titles, while in other districts only non-lease cultivation was recognised!

It is no wonder then that in any forest village, an absurd checkerboard of titled and non-titled lands exists today (see Figure 2). Our study of Forest Villages revealed huge under-recognition of titles across the board, and our checkerboard maps from two villages finally triggered some response: a half-baked new procedure was rolled out in 2025. But addressing the problem requires better interpretation of the FRA provisions than the Ministry of Tribal Affairs has done so far, and it will eventually require all States to go together to the court to assert that dereservation is a matter of justice.

However, for such efforts, underlying attitudes have to change significantly. Currently, other departments see Forest Villages as the foresters' headache; foresters still see conversion as a "loss of precious forest land" and, of course, a loss of power, and for elected representatives, Forest Villages are too dispersed a vote bank. Justice, thus, continues to evade the Forest Villagers.

Sharachchandra Lele





▶ **Maps of Pondi Forest Village** in Dindori, Madhya Pradesh. The first shows the boundaries of the village with cultivation inside. The second shows titled (blue) and non-titled (red) plots (before ATREE intervened).

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

villager presence and use of the landscape. The forest department still monopolises management, but these examples validate the FRA's preference for coexistence. Genuine co-management, which includes community ownership of tourism enterprises, could fortify these gains through more adaptive management that Gram Sabhas can offer. With roughly 30 per cent of tigers now found outside reserves, governments and conservationists are increasingly turning their attention to these landscapes, where the language of coexistence has become impossible to avoid. However, that commitment will ring hollow if violations inside tiger reserves go unfixed.

A **THIRD ARENA** of conflict is that of "development". The diversion of forest land for purposes like mines, dams, and highways is regulated by the Forest Conservation Act (FCA), 1980, which mandates the Centre's approval for any diversion. The FRA said nothing explicitly about its role in these decisions, but it was obvious enough that the Centre issued an executive order in 2009, later folded into the FCA rules in 2014, to make rights recognition and Gram Sabha consent preconditions for considering diversion proposals. This change found its fullest expression in 2013, when 12 Gram Sabhas in Odisha's Niyamgiri hill were asked by the Supreme Court to decide whether a proposed bauxite mine would violate their rights. All 12 said it would, and the Centre ultimately declined its approval. A watershed–but one that soon ran dry.

In the last decade, the FCA's provisions have been practically bypassed and legally whittled down to allow the Centre's approval before forest rights are even considered and to drop the requirement of Gram Sabha consent. What was a precondition is now a fait accompli, papered over as the government wishes, as diversions continue apace. An analysis by the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment of 395 forest diversion proposals for large mining projects submitted between 2009 and 2024 found that only 20 were rejected, and not one because forest rights were not yet fully settled or consent refused. This is remarkable considering that recognition of CFR rights has barely begun in mining hot spots like Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand. More detailed case studies substantiated that rights recognition and consent have been reduced to procedural checkboxes, manoeuvred around, if not forged outright, with scant regard to the substantive rights the Act protects.

**In tiger reserves where CFR rights have been recognised, including in CTHs, tiger populations have remained stable or grown in spite of continued villager presence.**

Last year, the Chhattisgarh High Court hollowed out the Niyamgiri judgment when it upheld the cancellation of CFR rights in the Hasdeo forests, in an area cleared for mining, reasoning that the loss could be compensated with money, never mind that the FRA recognises pre-existing rights and contains no provision for cancelling them. To be sure, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs has repeatedly written to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change over these dilutions, asking, as far back as 2012, to be included in the regulatory process. Yet forest diversion remains administered exclusively by the forest bureaucracy, which would rather undermine CFR rights, even if forests themselves are at stake.

What connects these other regimes–and, increasingly, a newer legal economy of compensatory afforestation, "green credits", and the like, all treating forests as a fungible asset–often at cross-purposes themselves, is a shared willingness to bypass the law made to place Gram Sabhas at the centre of decision-making. Of all the competing demands, forest-dwellers still have the least say. Conflicts between laws provide ammunition for lawyers and armour for activists, but the ambiguity mostly helps governments evade accountability. This is an unfinished agenda that burdens the FRA.

As the FRA turns 20, what has changed is the frame through which the law views forest-dwellers but not the structures through which the state decides and acts. Between paper and forest floor, an entrenched bureaucracy, aided by an indifferent political class, has managed to subvert the FRA's most radical promise of genuinely democratic, grassroots governance of forests. Perhaps what we need is a single forest code–democratically deliberated, not parachuted into Parliament–that treats CFR rights as its backbone and builds from there a more downwardly accountable framework of forest governance. But even this will not hold if the FRA's founding premise is forgotten: the nation owes forest-dwellers a debt, not a favour. ■

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# WHY THE FRA MATTERS IN ARUNACHAL

Arunachal Pradesh's refusal to implement the Forest Rights Act leaves indigenous communities whose lives are inextricably linked with its forests vulnerable. **GAUTAM AREDATH** AND **RAJKAMAL GOSWAMI**

Arunachal Pradesh's forests, covering 80 per cent of its area, remain inseparable from the ancestral homeland of the indigenous Scheduled Tribes, who account for two-thirds of the State's population. Every activity linked to land–cultural, material, and commercial–is, in one way or another, linked to forests. Even at first glance, the Forest Rights Act (FRA) would seem not only relevant but exceptionally so.

Since 2012, however, the State government's position has been that the FRA is "not so relevant… because of the prevalent customary community ownership of forest land". Indeed, land tenure in Arunachal Pradesh, like in most of the north-eastern region, differs markedly from the rest of India. The state takeover of forests during colonial rule was limited here due to difficult terrain, geographic isolation, and fierce resistance from tribal communities. Consequently, local communities have continued to exercise fairly autonomous control over their customary territories.

The government's position, however, is untenable on two grounds. At present, nearly 45 per cent of the State's area is actually state-controlled forests, the highest of all the north-eastern States. The expansion of state forests has happened at the expense of "unclassed forests", which are community lands that lack clear legal demarcation. This has resulted in uncertainties around legal tenure and rights. Meanwhile, unlike Nagaland or Mizoram, Arunachal does not have the special constitutional status to not implement the FRA.

One statistic underscores the need to revisit the official stance on the FRA: more than two-thirds of all forest land diverted in the State since 2008 were approved after 2019. Recent amendments to the Forest Conservation Act (FCA) have further eased scrutiny for projects in border States. The government's stand on the FRA must be seen in this context. Ironical-

▶ **A land use gradient** of homesteads, irrigated paddy fields, plantations, jhum tracts, and customary forests in the Siang valley of Arunachal Pradesh. MONSOON JYOTI GOGOI ly, the FRA appears in official paperwork only when communities are asked to consent to forest diversions, without the law being actually implemented or rights being recognised.

Despite community mobilisations having challenged the increasing forest diversion, the demand for FRA implementation remains muted. This is partly due to the widespread misconception that the FRA caps all rights at 4 hectares, ill-suited to Arunachal where even households customarily hold and use entire hills and shifting cultivation is common. In fact, that ceiling applies only to individual cultivation and homestead claims, whereas communities' rights over customary forests are limited by traditional boundaries alone.

Furthermore, the FRA's Section 3(1)(j), as yet unutilised anywhere in the country and perhaps designed specifically for the north-eastern region, explicitly includes any rights recognised under State or customary tribal law. This matters enormously for Arunachal Pradesh. The Jhum Land Regulation, 1947, a State law, recognises a customary right of villages, clans, and smaller groups to land used for "shifting cultivation" or for "clearing jungle or grazing livestock". But it also allows the government to acquire such land for "public purposes" without any formal acquisition process. Section 3(1)(j) would place customary rights on a far stronger footing by formally recording them and applying safeguards against arbitrary diversion. Further, community forest rights would allow communities to nullify the untenable declaration of forested community land as state forests. It would also confer statutory backing to community-conserved areas that many communities in the State are pursuing.

**Given the rate of forest loss, and customary rights along with it, implementing the FRA in Arunachal Pradesh has become imperative.**

The FRA is, however, no silver bullet to all the issues around forest land in Arunachal Pradesh. Given the expansion of state-controlled forests, several old villages and even towns, including parts of Itanagar, technically stand on state forest land. In such cases, where commercial use, land leasing, and sale are at stake for individual holdings, legalising such settlements will require challenging the legal notifications in courts, or "dereserving" forest lands through the FCA.

INSTEAD OF A COHERENT policy to address these complex challenges, the government has used a red herring called land possession certificates. These certificates, often criticised for the arbitrary manner in which they are issued, formally recognise landholdings thus enabling their commercial use, leasing, and collateralisation. While this may provide immediate relief in some cases, they have created the risk of customary lands being privatised clandestinely. A combination of FRA implementation and other legal strategies is likely to offer more durable and effective solutions to these issues.

Implementing the FRA in Arunachal Pradesh, especially the mapping of complex customary tenures, can look a lot different from its implementation elsewhere and will require much more thought, sustained sensitisation, and capacity-building of both communities and bureaucrats. But given the rate of forest loss, and customary rights along with it, this has become imperative, and one that may hold lessons for the FRA's application elsewhere in north-eastern India's diverse legal and customary terrain. ■

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[ FROM THE SIDELINES ]

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# Flash flood

Just when it seemed that democracy had more or less been put to sleep, the earth split and people emerged from the cracks, exactly like cockroaches.

They came with the delayed rains, a flood of humanity that suddenly marched into the capital. There were young school and college students crying and shaken. Why did they hit me, I just want clean exams, they smashed my phone. There was another demographic too, hardier youth who had travelled long distances on trains and buses. They spoke of their search for jobs; how one government post sees thousands converging for it.

On July 20, the day Parliament resumed for the monsoon session, I met many such young people, from Other Backward Classes and Dalit backgrounds, from educated, forward caste backgrounds, from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, the Hindi heartland. They had degrees that had got them nothing beyond jobs as salespeople in Delhi stores selling fashionable clothes they could never afford for themselves. They had taken the day off to protest for their lives, their blocked futures. “I too am fighting for my country,” one said.

They were all met with police batons, barricades, and tear gas shells.

The spiralling jobs and education crisis has made what started as a meme, the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), into a storm that culminated in one of the largest gatherings of protesters in the capital in recent decades. Delhi has been central to protests, from the Anna Andolan of 2011; to the lightning protests against the rape and murder of Nirbhaya in 2012; to the agitation against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) of 2019 that converged in Shaheen Bagh; to the year-long farmers’ agitation against three farm laws on the three borders of the city from 2020 to 2021.

In 2026, just when it seemed that democracy had more or less been put to sleep through the Special Intensive Revision, the engineered splits of rival political parties, and the bending of institutions, suddenly the earth split and people emerged from the cracks, exactly like cockroaches, the metaphor the protesters use for themselves.

There are three big reasons why the CJP movement suddenly took off. First, there was already widespread awareness online. The cockroach meme has had a butterfly effect on a young audience that is frustrated, over-tested, and cheated, on both tests and jobs. They are watching an India where inequality keeps growing.

Second, the sociologically significant aspect when the CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke returned to India on June 6 and started a protest in Jantar Mantar. That Dipke is a Dalit cannot be ignored, although it is not the central story of this agitation. That first day of protest was shaky and tentative, and here another element comes in, less mentioned in media accounts. The All India Students’ Association (AISA) affiliated with the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation is influential on university campuses. The AISA cadre provided the agitational format, quick gatherings in a circle, a certain verve to the tentative protest, the rhythmic slogans and music. Eventually, six AISA students went on a hunger strike, with three, Neha Bora, Manish Kumar, and Aameen Amitoj, continuing it for 23 days until July 20.

The third factor was the arrival of the Ladakh-based engineer, environmentalist, and education reformer Sonam Wangchuk, who joined the CJP and launched a hunger strike on June 28. The protest now had a moral figure at its centre in the persona of someone who has worked on educational reforms besides other constitutional battles. Indeed, the police forcibly

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**A student at** the Cockroach Janta Party protest in New Delhi on July 22. The poster reads: "When Modi is afraid, he hides behind the police." ANINDITO MUKHERJEE/BLOOMBERG

picking Wangchuk up from the site on the 21st day of his fast is what lit the last spark. The CJP said Wangchuk's call for a march to Parliament was still on. Suddenly, something shifted, people were touched, everyone wanted to converge at Jantar Mantar and head to Parliament. Only when the rage became palpable did the government invite representatives of the CJP for a talk on July 20. It was too late. A violent police response added to the outrage, changing a manageable protest into something huge. A self-goal for New Delhi.

**THE ISSUE NOW** is beyond the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. And one waits to see what final outcome this movement will have. The Anna movement, for instance, began with a demand for an effective anti-corruption law but instead created the AAP in 2012, which decimated the Congress in the 2014 Lok Sabha election and launched Narendra Modi as Prime Minister, with the BJP winning a simple majority. The movement had intended and unintended consequences.

The farmers' agitation actually had the neatest trajectory of achieving its stated goals. One year after the protest, the three farm laws were rolled back. The anti-CAA protests were shut down partly by the 2020 north-east Delhi riots but entirely by the COVID-19 lockdown. The city's Muslims were demonised as COVID-19 spreaders, even as their homes were burnt down and looted and they moved to refugee tents. The protest, however, did not achieve its objectives: the law was eventually notified, and the BJP has since only hardened policies and ground action against Muslims.

So which direction will the cockroach groundswell go? The slogans raised on the streets of Delhi on July 20 were about Prime Minister Narendra Modi too; the movement has tapped into something beyond revamping the education system. Some political parties appear to have stepped into the movement. Aazad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram) leader Chandrashekhar Azad, who has pockets of influence in Uttar Pradesh, visited Jantar Mantar and is now on dharna at Parliament. Dimple Yadav, MP and wife of Akhilesh Yadav, who heads the Samajwadi Party, helped wounded students at Jantar Mantar and sharply criticised police brutality.

**The slogans raised on the streets of Delhi on July 20 were about Prime Minister Narendra Modi too; the movement has tapped into something beyond revamping the education system.**

And finally, there is the conspiracy theory that the CJP is a front for the AAP because Dipke once worked for the party's social media cell. The Congress cold-shouldered the movement, and Rahul Gandhi stayed far from it. Then, the Congress began to unbend. First, its spokespersons made statements of support, then Seva Dal members visited the site with food, now the Congress has taken up the issue of police brutality on protesting students in Parliament, and its leaders courted arrest by protesting in front of Modi's house.

While it is true that AAP founder Arvind Kejriwal understands agitations and spearheaded the Anna movement, his alleged role in the CJP movement seems far-fetched. The most consistent conspiracy theory over the past 15 years is that the Anna movement was an RSS creation. Certainly, RSS cadres were there in the movement, openly so, as was the AISA, but it is reductionist to imagine that Kejriwal choreographed the movement on behalf of the Sangh. He was his own man in Delhi politics, which has now been destroyed, but his party remains in power in Punjab.

Meanwhile, the fact that Punjab's farmers are now trying to make common cause with the students is something that will not make New Delhi happy, and it could have a political impact. Hovering over all this are the right-wing influencers on television channels who suggest that the protest is the work of anarchists backed by foreign powers, perhaps even Pakistan. They claim that foreign powers orchestrated regime change in Bangladesh and Nepal and now want to do it in India. Their thoughts are brittle, and they seem to imagine that the Indian government is brittle too. ■

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# The cockroaches and the strongman

Modi's "strongman" politics depends on appearing immune to public pressure, though his record shows repeated tactical retreats when the political stakes become high enough. The CJP protests may become the next major challenge to that governing style.

The government's attitude to and actions against the Cockroach Janta Party's (CJP) protest and the indefinite hunger strike by the public activist Sonam Wangchuk provide an opportunity to examine Prime Minister Narendra Modi's political temperament regarding public pressure, protests, and agitation.

Normally, when faced with pressure, Modi's instinctive response is not to engage with the protesters at all but to buttress his image among his supporters as "the" 56-inch-chested "strongman" with an unshakeable will. On this occasion, however, given the unforeseen multitudes of people turning out to march to Parliament, and with protests across the country too, Union Health Minister J.P. Nadda was asked to host a semblance of dialogue with the protesters. But the simultaneous lathicharge and firing of tear gas shells on protesters indicate that perhaps the government will not permit Modi's image to be dented by accepting the demand for Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation.

Any further concession will run the risk of being seen by his supporters as a sign of weakness and will also elevate a digital, satirical, protest movement to a legitimate political stakeholder. Yet, it is the response of the administration to the continued vigour of the protesters after the events of July 20 that are likely to determine if Modi has moved from rhetorical posturing to strategic public action.

Historical evidence shows that Modi has rarely "succumbed" to pressure. There have, however, been occasions when he has chosen the path of pragmatism, especially when a protest has had the potential to jeopardise his core electoral demographic or if there was a probability of a critical bloc withdrawing support, particularly one essential for remaining in power.

In contrast to Modi's initial toughness in the face of the CJP-Wangchuk challenge, the "strongman" image was absent when, in 2024, the Union Public Service Commission advertised for lateral entry into the bureaucracy bypassing constitutionally protected reservation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes. The no-nonsense Modi bowed down in this instance due to fear that the BJP's electoral base among these communities would get eroded.

Over the past 12 years, Modi has often been two-faced when confronted with protests or public pressure. While one side, readily adopted by his supporters, is his instinctive rhetorical posture to further impress his political constituency with his uncompromisingness, the other facet, chosen after due calculation and assessment, is that of strategic action.

Almost without fail, Modi's rhetorical stance is populist, hyper nationalist, emotionally charged, and one that ceaselessly depicts India as a rising global superpower (Vishwaguru) that does not bow to external pressures. The latter mantra, of India being super-guru, surprisingly has the backing of RSS

▶ **When the police** lathicharged protesters at the "Chalo Sansad" march to Parliament organised by the Cockroach Janta Party, on July 20, 2026. AMIT/ANI

chief Mohan Bhagwat despite his "differences" with Modi, especially on promoting the cult around him.

MODI'S STRATEGIC ACTION has, at times (like when he withdrew three farm laws), involved accepting the demands of public protest, albeit at a time of his choice. But, he frames the backtracking or concession on policy matters in a manner that projects himself as an amicable leader willing to accept other points of view too.

That "Modi-never-backs down" is a myth was proven very early—as many as six years prior to him retracing his steps on the farm laws in 2021. In less than a year of assuming office in May 2014, Modi's government tried to amend the Land Acquisition Act, 1894, to make it easier for corporates to buy land. But there was a roar of protest, even from within the Sangh Parivar. Coupled with the biting opposition campaign that the Modi government was a "*suit-boot ki sarkar*", the effort proved to be a hurdle he could not cross.

**Because he stands to lose more, Modi's strategic actions at this juncture will have to be more innovative and move beyond the trodden path.**

The slogan was Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's coinage and a play on Modi's megalomaniacal decision to wear a bespoke pinstripe suit with his name, Narendra Damodardas Modi, woven into every thread of the fabric. Modi's decision to wear the suit during his meeting with the then President of the US, Barack Obama, in New Delhi, on the eve of Republic Day, made matters worse. Thereafter, he could do little but drop the Bill completely.

In contrast, Modi did not engage with the CJP, until this became a tactical necessity because even discussing the demand for Pradhan's resignation would be little short of bowing to a group that is not even a formal political platform and would shatter to smithereens the carefully constructed image of the "infallible" executive.

By not engaging with the protesters, the government sought to reduce the youth unrest to a matter related solely to law and order and medical evaluation rather than an issue requiring political and administrative intervention, debate, or self-examination.

However, the government's intuitive decision to rhetorical-

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**Modi has yielded to pressure from "outside" and forced Ministers out in the past too, but the difference was that he did so at a time of his own choosing.**

ly play deaf to demands for Pradhan's resignation when the CJP first gave its call has to be contextualised against its attempts to contain the digital spread of the CJP and its protest.

Besides, the government's inexplicable decision to change Delhi's Police Commissioner has to also be seen as a strategic move to contain the protest. Quite clearly, the government saw an urgency in removing Wangchuk from the protest site and to a hospital before the proposed march to Parliament on July 20. Yet, the process of taking him away was visually shielded by a "white" curtain to provide a veil of purity to a surreptitious act that claimed to follow a judicial directive but did not have political and moral sanctity. The strong-arm tactics of the police through July 20 were a continuation of the same tactic.

From day one, the government projected that Modi did not care a hang about the CJP, yet it was undeniably worried about the viral growth of this movement that began as a scornful online response to the arrogant words of Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, who violated the basic tenet of a person holding office: weighing the meaning of one's words before blurting them out.

In the event of the protest continuing, even gaining in strength, Modi will be faced with an unprecedented challenge.

When faced with protest of any sort, Modi's instinctive response has always been one of indifference or waiting it out, hoping the protests die by themselves. This is invariably coupled with delegitimisation of the protesters: labelling them as misguided youth, politically motivated, *tukde tukde* gang, urban naxals, anti-nationals, and so on. In this instance, such phraseology could not be used because the CJP insisted from the start on keeping a distance from political parties.

Numerous policies of the Union government, ranging from import of Russian crude oil, pursuing welfare programmes while running down similar schemes of opposition-party-run State governments (*revdi* [freebies], and so on), are also instances of Modi doublespeak, where the government's strategic actions go against Modi's rhetorical public posturing. Modi assumed office against the backdrop of the public perception of the Manmohan Singh government being "weak", with the former Prime Minister even lamenting the limitations of running a coalition government. The image was further fostered by Modi during his campaign, often with mockery.

In contrast, Modi projected himself as a macho leader who would brook no arm-twisting or even legitimate protest. In office, besides the electoral hegemony he has established, Modi has had to live up to that image for his supporters to retain faith in him as an all-conquering Great Leader.

Any engagement on the demand for Pradhan's resignation would not just be interpreted as systemic vulnerability or concession; it would remain on Modi's track record as a "precedent" that could become the template for the future.

The events that took place in the aftermath of Wangchuk's removal to the hospital did not quite go according to what the government expected. The sheer numbers of protesters and the outpouring of anger caught the government unawares. Now, Modi will have to don his thinking cap to devise an appropriate strategy. The Prime Minister can be expected to make a concession, or accept the demands only if he assesses that the CJP's public traction has reached a point where it can begin to wean away communities from the BJP's voter base.

It is not that Modi has never "sacrificed" Ministers. The (demanded) resignations of Health Minister Dr Harsh Vardhan and his deputy, Ashwini Choubey, were widely interpreted as an admission of systemic failure during the catastrophic second wave of COVID-19 in India, and as a course correction.

**BUT THESE RESIGNATIONS** in July 2021—along with the "sacking" of several other Ministers with considerable public profiles, as against the current nondescript Ministers, Chief Ministers, and even party president—perpetuated the image of Modi as a "democratic emperor".

With the removal of publicly recognised "visible" Ministers like Ravi Shankar Prasad, Prakash Javadekar, Ramesh Pokhriyal "Nishank", D.V. Sadananda Gowda, and Santosh Gangwar, Modi refurbished his image as a leader capable of showing the door to those who either fail to live up to the challenge or who intend to construct independent self-identities.

That the management of the devastating second wave of the pandemic was a colossal failure on part of the government is well known. But by evicting Harsh Vardhan, he was shown as the "fall guy" even though the government was no less centralised at the time than it was on day one (and as it is now). Certainly, Modi and his core team of officials were as "complicit" as Vardhan in the mismanagement of the crisis.

Likewise, Prasad's exit was linked, through selective leaks to the media, with escalating global and domestic friction over new Internet regulations and free speech controversies involving major tech platforms.

With the exit of Ministers like Vardhan, Prasad, and Javadekar, the narrative was not that "the Prime Minister failed". Instead, it was publicised that he "acted swiftly" and signalled to all that performance alone would ensure the continuity of their positions. But more important than individual Ministers being shown the door was the July 2021 reorganisation of the Council of Ministers, the largest such exercise by Modi to date (with the entry of 36 new Ministers and 7 promotions, including of younger faces, technocrats, and regional heavyweights), which was likened to a corporate-style shake-up by an all-powerful CEO.

**BACK THEN, MODI** made "scapegoats" while protecting his image. In contrast, if any concession is made by Modi at the present juncture, it will be interpreted as Modi being "forced" by an adversary to "yield". Permitting the broadcast of such a political message would undermine Modi's "strongman" lapel pin. But, given the extent of support for the movement, if Modi has to concede the central demand—Pradhan's head—it will only be by making him the fall guy.

Modi has yielded to pressure from "outside" and forced Ministers out in the past too, but the difference was that he did so at a time of his own choosing. For instance, in the case of the exit of M.J. Akbar in 2018, when allegations of sexual harassment were made against him during the #MeToo movement, Modi waited for a full 10 days or so, allowing him to return from an official foreign trip and file a legal response before allowing him to resign a few days later.

The junior Home Minister Ajay Mishra Teni was more fortunate than Akbar because he had independent political support in his constituency, Kheri. Towards the fag end of the farmers' agitation, Teni's son, Ashish Mishra, deliberately drove his car over protesting farmers and killed four farmers and a local journalist. Despite the uproar, Teni retained office until he was dropped after the 2024 Lok Sabha election. In both cases, Modi responded to public pressure but on his terms and when it suited him.

▼ **Cockroach Janta Party** founder Abhijeet Dipke addressing protesters marching towards Parliament, seeking the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, on July 20.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

As mentioned previously, reports have surfaced of spontaneous protests in different parts of India after Wangchuk was removed to the hospital. This, however, is unlikely to force Modi to moderate his rhetorical posturing immediately. Yet, as part of its strategic action plan, the government will likely keep an administrative and political watch on the expansion of the CJP plank, digitally as well as on the streets and in parks.

Initially, the Prime Minister correctly deduced that digital outrage and moral resonance do not seamlessly translate into immediate electoral vulnerabilities at the ballot box. Yet, the removal of one key "cockroach", instead of quelling the movement, has witnessed the emergence of many more "cockroaches", a characteristic of the actual insect as well.

Slogans resonating at the protest have not stopped with the call for Pradhan's removal. The boisterous, frustrated, and angry youth, not shackled by organisational discipline, have drawn Modi into their verbal dragnet. This is likely to make Modi's attempts to re-engineer the physics of dissent and the task of affixing hostile lapel pins on the protesters all the more difficult.

Like any strongman, Modi has spoken up only when faced with electoral desertions from within his constituency. There is no knowing if and when the CJP will cross the barrage of invisibility and emerge as a hyper-quantifiable electoral threshold.

The only solace for Modi is that even the opposition parties would eventually be challenged in such a scenario. But because he stands to lose more, Modi's strategic actions at this juncture will have to be more innovative and move beyond the trodden path. ■

Controversy

# Unholy mess

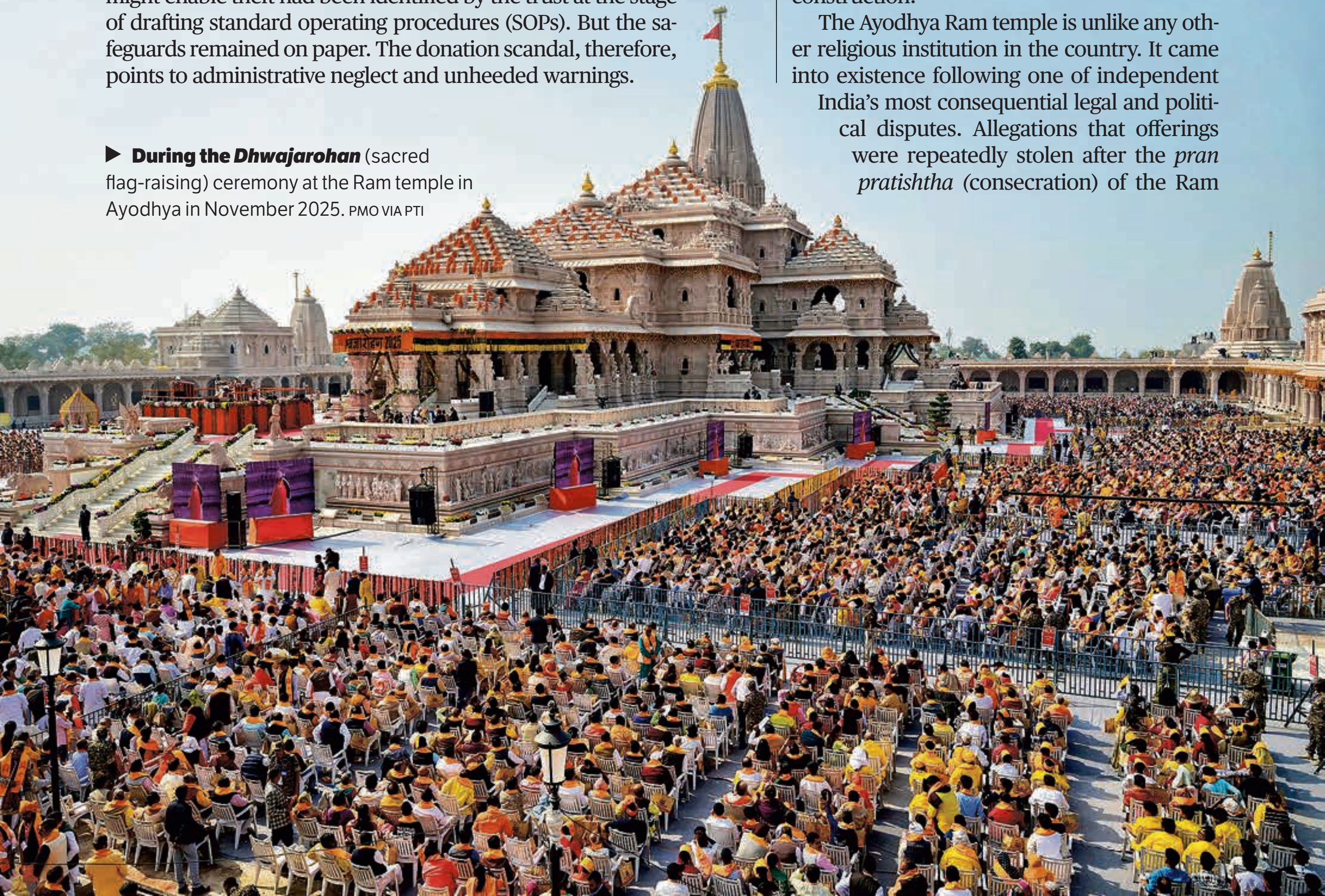
The initial SIT report on the Ayodhya Ram temple donation scandal has highlighted the deep rot in the management of one of India's wealthiest religious institutions. **ASHUTOSH SHARMA**

When the Uttar Pradesh government set up a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe allegations of theft of devotees' offerings at Ayodhya's Ram temple, there was a general expectation that it would identify a few rogue employees at the shrine. But the preliminary findings of the SIT, which were submitted before the Supreme Court in a sealed cover on July 19, point to something much deeper that has brought into question the entire management of the Shri Ram Janmbhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust.

According to the SIT report, the possible conditions that might enable theft had been identified by the trust at the stage of drafting standard operating procedures (SOPs). But the safeguards remained on paper. The donation scandal, therefore, points to administrative neglect and unheeded warnings.

The public outcry has already claimed the resignations of the general secretary of the trust, Champat Rai, and trustee Anil Mishra. Eight people have been arrested so far. Additionally, the trust has removed Gopal Nagarkatte from the list of its special invitees and announced changes in its executive body pending completion of the ongoing probe into misappropriations of offerings, including cash, gold, and silver. Nagarkatte, also known as Gopal Rao, is a senior Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) leader who oversaw the temple construction.

The Ayodhya Ram temple is unlike any other religious institution in the country. It came into existence following one of independent India's most consequential legal and political disputes. Allegations that offerings were repeatedly stolen after the *pran pratishtha* (consecration) of the Ram



▶ **During the *Dhwajarohan*** (sacred flag-raising) ceremony at the Ram temple in Ayodhya in November 2025. PMO VIA PTI

Lalla idol on January 22, 2024, a ceremony led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the presence of RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, have cast a shadow over one of India's richest religious trusts.

**THE ISSUE CAME TO LIGHT** on June 7 when Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav alleged that donations amounting to crores had gone missing from the temple. The State government's Home Department constituted a three-member SIT comprising Lucknow Divisional Commissioner Vijay Vishwas Pant as chairman and Lucknow Range Inspector General Kiran S. and Finance Department Special Secretary Neelratan Kumar as members, but only after the trust sent a written request on June 12 following a public and media outcry.

The SIT questioned people linked to the collection and counting of donations, examined CCTV footage from the counting rooms, examined the SOPs followed by the trust, scrutinised the bank records of employees, and analysed the internal documentation regarding the offerings.

The SIT report concludes that the institutional safeguards were either ignored or progressively weakened. It argues that the failure to enforce prescribed safeguards was "not merely a technical or procedural error, but rather deliberate negligence, which enabled the theft".

The report notes that the temple trust and State Bank of India had jointly developed a detailed framework governing the handling of donations. The inherent risks associated with handling large volumes of cash and valuables were acknowledged in a memorandum of understanding and subsequent SOPs, finalised in September 2024 and February 2025. Therefore, an elaborate chain of custody starting from the opening of donation boxes in the joint presence of trust and bank officials to the counting, documentation, and eventual deposit of funds was clearly prescribed. The SOPs were not observed even at the bank level, the investigation reveals.

The SOPs had listed a series of mandatory measures such as biometric attendance for counting personnel, frisking at entry and exit points, uniforms without pockets for employees, prohibition on carrying personal belongings into the counting room, box-wise counting of offerings, denomination-wise documentation, maintenance of registers, daily reporting, and regular or surprise inspections.

**The SIT report on the Ayodhya Ram temple theft concludes that the institutional safeguards were either ignored or slowly weakened.**

According to the SIT, these were not aspirational guidelines but mandatory procedures intended to ensure "transparency and accountability" in the counting process. In spite of clear instructions, the report notes that regular frisking of the employees concerned was not carried out; biometric attendance was either absent or ineffective; prescribed uniforms were not enforced and personal belongings were allowed inside the counting room; and the contents of different donation boxes were routinely mixed before counting.

Moreover, the report adds, there was no system to number and track the containers transporting cash from the temple to the counting room. Consequently, it became impossible to establish precisely which donations had been counted and which remained pending and whether shortages could be traced to a particular stage in the process.

The SIT has also found mismanagement of donated valuables. While it found no evidence to substantiate public allegations regarding missing silver bricks, jewellery, or the gold-plated *Ramcharitmanas*, it observed that procedures relating to weighing, photographing, sealing, and documenting such valuables were rarely followed.

**THE SIT FOUND** that the alleged thefts were neither isolated incidents nor impulsive actions. Since CCTV footage older than 45 days had been overwritten, investigators could not establish the full extent of the alleged theft. The footage available to the SIT covered the period between April 27 and June 5. In these five weeks alone, investigators recorded nearly 70 instances wherein counting personnel were allegedly seen concealing bundles of currency notes and loose cash in their clothing, trouser pockets, shoes, and other hidden locations. In several instances, the report says, fellow employees appeared to provide cover or assistance.

The SIT report draws attention to financial evidence that allegedly corroborates the CCTV footage. Those engaged in the counting process received a gross monthly salary of Rs.20,000

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▶ **Police take two of the accused,** Ramashankar Mishra and Subhash Srivastava, from the district jail following remand by the court in the case of the embezzlement of Ram temple donations, in Ayodhya on July 15. ANI

(about Rs.15,000 after deductions). But their bank accounts reflected cash deposits, fixed deposits, and other transactions that were found to be inconsistent with their known sources of income.

Notably, the trust had already recovered nearly Rs.79 lakh in Indian currency as well as foreign currency and jewellery from counting personnel before the SIT was constituted.

Although the SIT has not accused senior trust officials of participating in the alleged theft, it argues that supervisory failures created the conditions in which repeated theft became possible.

The report is particularly critical of Anil Mishra, who represented the trust in framing the joint SOP with SBI and was responsible for overseeing cash management. According to the SIT, Mishra was aware that frisking procedures were not being followed, but “no effective written instructions were issued” to enforce frisking, biometric attendance, prescribed dress codes, restrictions on personal belongings, donation box-wise counting, or daily reporting.

The report is equally critical of Subhash Srivastava, the counting-room in-charge. Despite acting as the principal supervisor, it notes, he failed to conduct mandatory frisking, enforce attendance and dress-code requirements, or ensure compliance with other prescribed security measures. The SIT report further questions the informal authority exercised by Ram Shankar Yadav, alias Tinnu, who allegedly retained custody of donation-box keys without authorisation and recommended the appointment of his nephew, Manish Kumar Yadav, to the counting team.

On institutional accountability, the report states unequivocally that “all trust officials accountable for implementing, supervising and monitoring the counting management process are responsible for this serious lapse”.

ANOTHER STRIKING FINDING by the SIT is that internal audit reports covering the financial years from 2022-23 to 2025-26 repeatedly highlighted deficiencies in the management of offerings, including inadequate documentation relating to the opening of donation boxes, deficiencies in CCTV coverage during the transfer of donations, and failures in issuing receipts for offerings received in kind.

The internal audits also recommended that CCTV recordings be preserved for 180 days instead of 45. According to the SIT, the recommendations were not taken seriously.

Ironically, an early warning about the vulnerability of the temple’s immense wealth had come from none other than Champat Rai himself. In a viral video on the eve of the temple’s consecration, he cautioned that protecting the temple’s valuables had become an enormous challenge, warning that even priests could be murdered for them.

THIS IS NOT the first time that the temple is in the news for a financial scandal. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement has been marred by allegations of financial irregularities. Many organisations associated with the movement periodically expressed disagreements over the handling of donations mobilised from across the country and abroad.

The Nirmohi Akhara, one of the principal litigants in the Ayodhya title suit, questioned the transparency of fundraising and collections by the VHP during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. The Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha later raised similar accusations. In 2015, its national spokesperson, Devendra Pandey, alleged that over Rs.1,400 crore, besides substantial quantities of gold and silver, had been misappropriated. Such allegations were directed primarily at the VHP leadership, including the late Ashok Singhal, who denied wrongdoing and maintained that the collections had been utilised for stone carving, mobilisation, and other legitimate expenses associated with the Ram temple.

These allegations never saw any audit or criminal prosecution. They remained part of the political and organisational contestations surrounding the Ram Janmabhoomi movement.

On July 20, the Supreme Court took over supervision of the investigation into the recent donation theft case. The top court directed the Uttar Pradesh government to reconstitute the SIT led by a senior Indian Police Service officer.

The biggest challenge before the trust now, observers say, is restoration of public confidence. ■

**Politics**

# DECEITS, DESERTIONS, AND THE AIADMK

Although Vijay's rise to power has dealt a body blow to both the DMK and the AIADMK, it is the latter that faces the greater threat, with many of its leaders crossing over to the TVK. How it emerges from this crisis will shape the State's political course. **ILANGOVAN RAJASEKARAN**

The overarching question about Tamil Nadu's Dravidian politics today is whether the two grand old parties that have dominated the State for six decades—the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), since 1967, and its offshoot, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), from 1972—are facing an existential challenge. With an aggressive new political force redefining political equations, the question has assumed urgency, more so in the face of the defections from the AIADMK.

Such doubts were raised in the past too, whenever the two parties experienced internal fractures and electoral setbacks. Political pundits wrote off the DMK after it was reduced to a mere two seats in the aftermath of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in 1991. Similarly, the AIADMK has survived some anxious times, first after the demise of its founder-leader, M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), and then after the defeat of his successor, Jayalalithaa. Today, some years after her demise and in the absence of a strong leader who could fill the void, the party is facing another existential crisis.

While Tamil Nadu's voters have, time and again, reposed their faith in these two Dravidian parties, this year, the matinee idol turned politician C. Joseph Vijay made a stunning debut as a "master disrupter" with his Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK). His rise to power has cost the DMK its No. 1 position and whipped up disorder within the AIADMK.

Defeat and the following desertions have shaken the edifice of the two established parties, with the DMK struggling to recoup after its rout and the AIADMK caught in a crisis that seems to threaten its very survival. While disruptions, desertions, and splits are not unsurprising in a party that has suffered a streak of defeats since 2021, no party, at least in Tamil Nadu, has witnessed such rapid mass desertions, triggered by fabricated narratives and fallacious reasoning, as has the AIADMK. These are not spontaneous actions. Behind them lurks a sinister motive that cannot be overlooked. To a large extent, parallels must be drawn with the BJP-triggered mass exodus from the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal.

What is emerging is a clear attempt to cannibalise the AIADMK—a party that has contributed significantly to the State's social and economic capital in its more than three decades of rule—and to destabilise it in a way that will make its revival difficult. There is little reason to believe that there is mass disenchantment against the AIADMK. In fact, both the DMK and the AIADMK, notwithstanding the many corruption

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▶ **AIADMK general secretary** and former Chief Minister Edappadi Palaniswami. SENTHILKUMAR/PTI charges against their functionaries, have put the State among the top five in India in all developmental parameters.

Political analysts, therefore, claim that these engineered desertions are part of a more disturbing long-term agenda by forces inimical to the Dravidian ideology and its welfare politics. The primary intention of these forces is to occupy the political space that the AIADMK has enjoyed in Tamil Nadu politics. The attempt to hollow out Dravidianism as a political factor got an unexpected boost with Vijay's victory, which has turned Tamil Nadu politics topsy-turvy.

The TVK pitched itself as the primary opponent of the DMK, and by winning, it indeed relegated the hitherto main opposition party, the AIADMK, to third place, while pushing the ruling DMK, which enjoyed successive victories after the 2019 parliamentary election, to the opposition benches. After its win, the TVK has been eagerly accepting into its fold the many AIADMK leaders who are jumping ship.

It is broadly known by now that Vijay's political hatchet man Aadhav Arjuna, a member of "Lottery King" Santriago Martin's family and now a Minister in Vijay's Cabinet, along with TVK general secretary N. Anand are overseeing the desertions from the AIADMK. The idea is to strengthen the TVK's numbers and stabilise the government, which is propped up currently by the DMK's long-term allies, the Congress, the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), the Indian Union Muslim League, and the Left, who may or may not be relied upon to continue their support at crucial times.

Six AIADMK MLAs, including former Minister C. Vijayabaskar and M.R. Vijayabhaskar, have resigned and joined the TVK, while some 20 others, including heavyweights and former Ministers such as S.P. Velumani, C.Ve. Shanmugam, and Natham R. Viswanathan, defied the party whip to extend support to the TVK in the trust vote. Aadhav Arjuna has, in fact, openly declared that "the AIADMK would soon merge with the TVK".

What role is the BJP playing in all this? Can it be held responsible for the exodus from the AIADMK? It could partly be the cause. Since the death of Jayalalithaa, the BJP has played a dubious role in the AIADMK's internal affairs, forcing alliances on it and influencing its key decisions. From former Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam's botched-up "Dharma Yudham" to Edappadi Palaniswami's election as party leader, the BJP has had a strong behind-the-scenes influence on the party, which cannot be dismissed. The BJP's aim even then was clear: to undermine the AIADMK so much that it would collapse and vacate the space for the BJP to position itself as the main opponent to the ideologically driven DMK. With the TVK emerging as the top party, the BJP is playing second fiddle for the time being.

**No party, at least in Tamil Nadu, has seen such rapid mass desertions, triggered by fabricated narratives and fallacious reasoning, as has the AIADMK.**

The AIADMK fell into the BJP's trap to ensure its own political survival. It extended support to many of the Centre's contentious Bills, including the Citizenship (Amendment) Act. It allied with it in the 2019 Lok Sabha and 2021 Assembly elections. In the 2024 parliamentary election, the AIADMK contested alone, only to team up with the BJP for the 2026 Assembly election. This, despite disenchanted cadres and functionaries. "A sort of uneasy partnership existed between the two, similar to that between a master and his vassal," said a political analyst. The master here, of course, being the BJP.

THE VARIOUS DESERTIONS, however, have neither rattled the AIADMK leadership nor sent its rank and file into panic. The exits are confined to a few first- and second-rung leaders and their immediate followers. The cadres who were the party's mainstay through its decades of victories and defeats largely remain with the party, say observers. Their loyalty is tied to the party and the iconic *rettai elai* (two leaves) symbol. "In fact, the space left by the deserters has now been allotted to those working for the party at the grassroots level for a long time. The party is being infused with fresh air," said a senior party functionary.

Earlier, migrations were mostly to the DMK, with deserters (barring a few exceptions) rarely joining national parties like the BJP or the Congress. Interestingly, desertions from the DMK, even during its 13-year hiatus from power, were sporadic. For those AIADMK members reluctant to shift to the DMK because of the strong antipathy cultivated over the years by MGR and Jayalalithaa (ironically, half the Ministers in the DMK cabinet were one-time AIADMK leaders), the TVK offers a comfortable alternative with its soft, Hindutva-coated Dravidianism. Like the AIADMK, the TVK is not a strident follower of Periyar, although he is paraded as one of its political and social icons. As Vijay puts it: "We do not

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**Former AIADMK Ministers** C. Vijayabaskar and M.R. Vijayabhaskar, with other party functionaries, joined the TVK, at Mamallapuram, in Chengalpattu, on June 2.

LAKSHMI/ANI

subscribe to Periyar's atheism, but we do endorse his principles of self-respect and social justice." He even mocked statements by the DMK and its then allies, the Left and the VCK, about the "threats of fascism", claiming their actions were worse. At this point, it would be politically immature to write off a party such as the AIADMK. It has, like the DMK, cultivated, consolidated, and taken deep root in Tamil Nadu's electoral politics. Its cadre base and structure are likely to endure. Behind the desertions, thus, something else is at play: an attempt to sow doubt in the minds of cadres about the party leadership. "Those who revolted against it are those who elected him [Palaniswami] as general secretary. His growing stature in the party has made a few front-line leaders jealous," said the senior functionary.

For his part, Palaniswami, AIADMK general secretary and former Chief Minister, is to be blamed at least partly for the chaos in his party. He does not tolerate strong leaders. In fact, although he kept a low profile when powerful leaders like Jayalalithaa were alive, after V.K. Sasikala, Jayalalithaa's former aide, made him Chief Minister before going to jail in the disproportionate assets case, Palaniswami grew in strength and stature through carefully curated moves.

After being elected as general secretary in a controversial meeting that saw the exit of a few senior leaders, nothing could stop him from taking total control of the party. He deliberately induced desertions of many seniors and kept a few others on the bench. Paneerselvam, a two-time Chief Minister and a powerful post-Jayalalithaa leader, who shared leadership with him for a brief spell, was expelled.

The "dual leadership" arrangement was uncomfortable for Palaniswami, who wanted both party and administration for himself. Seeing Panneerselvam as a threat, he ensured that he never rejoined the party despite the latter's unconditional willingness to do so. In a huff, Panneerselvam joined the DMK, fighting and retaining his Periyakulam seat.

Palaniswami also saw a threat in senior leader K.A. Sengottaiyan, now a Minister in the TVK Cabinet. Palaniswami ignored Sengottaiyan and even ridiculed him at one point. J.C.D. Prabhakar, once an active AIADMK functionary, contested for the TVK and became Speaker. Yet another senior leader, S. Semmalai, an MLA and Minister since MGR's days, was denied a ticket. He quit the party. The list is long.

The main grievance of those who have left the AIADMK is that Palaniswami's authoritativeness is, of late, bordering on arrogance. They accuse him of promoting his son. But Palaniswami has remained unflappable, dismissing the accusations and the desertions. He has adopted different yardsticks to deal with rebels: readmitting those who submit to his power and shunning those who resign. Many MLAs, including Velumani, returned quietly and accepted Palaniswami's amnesty. The AIADMK approached the Madras High Court, asking it to instruct the Speaker to initiate disqualification proceedings against those who joined the TVK. This aggressive stand was meant to assert his control over the party and to pre-empt future dissent.

Palaniswami found in C.Ve. Shanmugam a stormy petrel. Shanmugam, a powerful figure in his native Viluppuram district, merely retains his MLA position and basic membership card today. He has withdrawn from the public space. When he defied the whip, he was stripped of his post as District Secretary. Although he did not join the TVK, unlike his colleagues C. Vijayabas-

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kar and M.R. Vijayabhaskar, Palaniswami refused to restore him to his former position. Instead, he appointed his loyalist Pasupathy as District Secretary.

**ALTHOUGH ALL DISTRICT** units and functionaries retain an uneasy calm, the Villupuram unit has been experiencing intense internal conflicts. Meanwhile, those looking to quit and join the TVK have also been warned by those who have already crossed over that they might not receive the respect and recognition they seek. Palaniswami appears to hold the advantage as of now. Semmalai told *Frontline* over phone from the US that Palaniswami was averse to seniors in the party. “He feels threatened and insecure. It was Amma [Jayalalithaa] who gave me a ticket to contest from Mettur in the 2016 election. After her death, Palaniswami started ignoring me. I never spoke ill of him until I left the party a few months ago. Even the cadres are disillusioned. The party is now in the hands of a few selfish individuals,” he said.

The AIADMK forgave the rebels who defied its whip but rejoined the party, and asked the Speaker to drop disqualification proceedings against them. But the disqualification of those who resigned continued. The party has, in fact, challenged the Speaker’s decision on resignations in the Madras High Court, arguing that his acceptance of the resignations was invalid. In 2017, the then Speaker, P. Dhanapal, disqualified 18 AIADMK MLAs loyal to the estranged party legislator T.T.V. Dhinakaran, nephew of Sasikala, after they withdrew support to Palaniswami. This was upheld by the court in October 2018.

The poaching of the AIADMK’s rank and file is not new in a competitive political sphere. “It is a systemic problem in a clientele-based politics. As the principles of liberal democracy are at stake, such things are bound to happen. Instead of preparing the people for a democracy of values and culture, we have confined it to elections,” said G. Palanithurai, an expert in decentralised governance and a former professor of panchayati raj studies, The Gandhigram Rural Institute, Tamil Nadu.

The DMK has called all such desertions a “betrayal” of the people’s mandate and initiated an exercise to identify the reasons for its own defeat. Its leader, M.K. Stalin, has hinted at sweeping structural changes to “cater to Gen Z’s political aspirations”. But the AIADMK seems to be struggling to recoup.

This in itself means nothing. In the 1991 Assembly election, the DMK won just 2 of 234 seats. In the 1996 election, the AIADMK, led by Jayalalithaa, won only 8 seats. The defeats did not decimate them. While parties such as the AIADMK and the DMK, which boast of strong structural stability, are largely immune to disturbances and destabilisation within their ranks, analysts argue that this changes when a powerful third alternative like the TVK emerges.

**For those AIADMK members reluctant to shift to the DMK, the TVK offers a comfortable alternative with its soft, Hindutva-coated Dravidianism.**

The TVK with 108 seats has secured 34.92 per cent of the vote share in its electoral debut, eclipsing the performance of the DMK and AIADMK. The DMK’s vote share fell from 37.7 per cent (2021) to 24.2 per cent, a drop of 13.5 per cent. The AIADMK, which has seen a steady erosion of vote share since the 2019 Lok Sabha election, saw it fall from 33.29 per cent in 2021 to 21.24 per cent. The TVK finished second in 74 seats and third in 51 seats. The DMK won 59 seats, came second in 80, and finished third in 37, while the AIADMK won 47, finished second in 44, and came third in 81.

For the AIADMK, the decline to third place in a significant number of constituencies signals not merely an electoral setback but a danger that threatens to eat into its vitals. As a strong cadre-based party, it could pull itself out of this mess if its leadership acts prudently and remains accommodative.

Established parties worldwide are experiencing a serious erosion in membership, with the emergence of personality-driven populist parties whose unconventional approach and aggressive social media tools are rewriting equations between party and people. Tamil Nadu is seeing this phenomenon play out today.

The TVK has not sold any new ideology to the electorate. Its narrative is limited to “a clean, corruption-free administration”. The fight between “Us and Them” is not based on any ideological differences. The TVK, like the Dravidian parties, shares Periyar’s self-respect and B.R. Ambedkar’s social justice principles. But its resilience in the face of fascist incursions is not known and has not been tested.

Neither have the two Dravidian majors lost relevance in the political context of Tamil Nadu. They are being challenged, like established parties elsewhere, and how they respond and evolve will determine where they stand in the long arc of political and social change.

Despite the TVK’s dramatic entry, the fact that the DMK and AIADMK largely retain their core vote bank cannot be overlooked.

The AIADMK, however, is at a crossroads today. The implications of any moves to destroy it are not good for democracy or for Tamil Nadu. The ways in which it will impact the State will be far-reaching. ■

▶ **Mamata Banerjee's** Martyrs' Day rally in Kolkata on July 21 showed that she still enjoys formidable popular support, even if Ritabrata Banerjee's faction of the Trinamool Congress has the numbers in the Legislative Assembly. ANI

## Politics

# MORE THAN A SYMBOLIC FIGHT

While Mamata wages a battle to retain the name and symbol of the Trinamool, the ECI faces the charge of favouring factions that are aligned with the NDA. This has brought the spotlight back on the need for a separate law to eliminate subjectivity and bias in resolution of such disputes. **SONI MISHRA**

On January 1, 1998, Mamata Banerjee founded the Trinamool Congress, unveiling a new chapter in the politics of West Bengal. At a rally held in Kolkata to launch the party, Mamata herself sketched the party's emblem: two flowers blooming on twin branches of a plant emerging from the grass. The image, which was accepted by the Election Commission of India (ECI) as the Trinamool's election symbol, has been described by the party as conveying its intent to be connected with the grassroots and signifying its secular ideology.

Mamata's ownership of the symbol was undisputed, and in later years it became synonymous with the slogan of "*Maa, Maati, Maanush*" (Mother, Motherland, People). The party created history in 2011 by defeating the Left Front, which had been in power in West Bengal for 34 years, and Mamata went on to rule the State for 15 years.

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However, in the aftermath of the Trinamool's crushing defeat by the BJP in the April 2026 Assembly election, the party is in deep turmoil and grapples with large-scale desertions of its MLAs and MPs. The firebrand Mamata now has to fight to ensure she does not lose the much treasured "two flowers in the grass" logo and the party name.

In what is by now a familiar pattern of rebel factions approaching the ECI to be recognised as the real party, the breakaway group of Trinamool MLAs led by Ritabrata Banerjee, who has been recognised as Leader of the Opposition in the West Bengal Assembly, has approached the ECI seeking recognition for his faction as the "real" Trinamool.

"We are the All India Trinamool Congress. More than two-thirds of the MLAs are with us; corporators, municipal councillors, zila parishad chairpersons, and members are with us," he told reporters after a meeting with the full bench of the ECI in New Delhi on July 2.

The ECI has sought responses from the two Trinamool factions, asking for details about organisational elections and authorised signatories.

Over the years, there have been many struggles for election symbol and name between rival factions in parties, which have played out as high-voltage legal battles before the ECI. In many cases such contests have spilled over into the courts. The contests have been understandably fierce, given the importance of the election symbol in the Indian political system. The symbol functions as a visual synonym for a party. Parties appeal to the electorate to vote for their symbol, and voters who are not literate look for the symbol of their preferred party.

The ECI decides such disputes according to paragraph 15 of the Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968, according to which, "the commission may, after taking into account all the available facts and circumstances of the case and hearing such representatives of the sections or groups and other persons as desire to be heard, decide that one such rival section or group or none of such rival sections or groups is that recognised political party and the decision of the commission shall be binding on all such rival sections or groups".

**Contests for the party symbol have been fierce, given the importance of the election symbol in the Indian political system. It functions as a visual synonym for a party.**

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**West Bengal Leader of the Opposition** Ritabrata Banerjee after a meeting between his faction of the Trinamool Congress and the full bench of the Election Commission of India on July 2. PTI

HOWEVER, NEITHER paragraph 15 nor other provisions of the Symbols Order specify the determining test that the ECI must apply. The Supreme Court prescribed three tests while deciding the dispute between the rival Congress (O) and Congress (J) groups in 1972 (the Sadiq Ali case). These were a test analysing the provisions of the constitution of the party; a test assessing which of the two rival groups adhered to the aims and objectives of the party as incorporated in its constitution; and a test to ascertain which one enjoyed a majority in both the legislature and the party organisation.

In the dispute between the Congress (O) and the Congress (J), the ECI found the third test to be most helpful, and the test of majority became its preferred method of deciding such cases.

"Unfortunately, there is no law on this issue except cases decided by the Supreme Court in the Congress split and a few cases of other political parties, especially the one relating to the Janata Dal," said former Chief Election Commissioner T.S. Krishnamurthy.

"The ECI has been deciding such disputes as a court following principles outlined by the Supreme Court. Although the ECI's decisions have been challenged in the courts, courts have by and large approved the decisions of the ECI," he said.

The most recent disputes decided by the ECI were from Maharashtra, involving the splits in the Shiv Sena and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). An intense tussle was witnessed between the competing factions of the two parties, which was powered by the legal stalwarts fielded by the rival sides. In both the cases, the breakaway group was recognised as the real party and granted the symbol.

In the Shiv Sena case, which the ECI decided on February 17, 2023, Eknath Shinde's group got the bow-and-arrow symbol and the party name. Uddhav Thackeray, whose father Bal Thackeray had founded the Shiv Sena, was left to helm

▼ **A Trinamool Congress supporter** with party symbols painted on his body watches the election results on May 4, the day that signalled the end of the party's 15-year rule. PTI

what came to be known as Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray); his party was given the "flaming torch" symbol.

The veteran leader Sharad Pawar, who founded the NCP in 1999, appeared personally before the ECI on October 6, 2023, to argue against the petition filed by his nephew Ajit Pawar claiming that his group was the real NCP. On February 6, 2024, the ECI granted the party symbol, the clock, to Ajit Pawar's faction, which was recognised as the NCP. The Sharad Pawar's faction was eventually named NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar) and was granted the symbol "man blowing a trumpet".

The Shiv Sena (UBT) and the NCP (SP) later approached the Supreme Court, challenging the ECI's order. Their cases are pending before the court.

In many cases over the years, including the more recent ones such as the disputes in the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK, November 2017), the Samajwadi Party (January 2017), and the Janata Dal (United) (November 2017), the ECI evaluated the support of the competing factions in the legislature and in organisational wings in order to arrive at a decision. However, in the case of the Shiv Sena and the NCP, the ECI took its decision only on the basis of the numbers in the legislature.

**The most recent disputes decided by the ECI were from Maharashtra, involving the splits in the Shiv Sena and the NCP. In both the cases, the breakaway group was recognised as the real party.**

"The precedent established in the Sadiq Ali case is of the test of majority of elected representatives at all levels as also a test of majority in the organisation. Also, a faction may have more MPs or MLAs, but not as much support in the organisation. So, the commission has to look at both the legislative majority and the organisational strength," said the senior advocate Vijay Hansaria, who had argued before the ECI in the AIADMK case.

Hansaria said more recent cases show that the ECI has also considered the failure of parties to follow the party constitution or inform the ECI about amendments in their constitution and ensure there is sufficient intra-party democracy. "It also depends on how these parties are being run, whether they are following their own party constitution and informing the Election Commission about its status or election of office-bear-

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ers from time to time," he said.

In the Shiv Sena's case, the ECI said it attempted to apply the test of majority in the organisational wing but could not come to a satisfactory conclusion. A principal reason for this mentioned by the ECI was that the party's "rashtriya karyakarini" was "elected" by a largely "appointed" "pratinidhi sabha", and this did not generate confidence that the Uddhav Thackeray faction was a truly democratic body. "Hence, numerical strength in such body cannot be relied upon with confidence while adjudicating a dispute case under paragraph 15 of the Symbols Order," the ECI said in its order.

**IN THE ORDER ON THE NCP,** the ECI said that it found that most of the positions in the working committee, which is the apex body of the party, were filled through appointments rather than elections. The ECI also said that upon considering the communications provided by the party, no details emerged about elections at lower-level bodies, which was a requirement for forming the national committee and ultimately the election of the national president. "[T]he commission in the present dispute case is constrained to reject the application of test of majority in the organisational wing of the party as the details of the organisational structure of the party, its members and their elections appear to be without any foundational basis," the ECI said.

The Uddhav Thackeray and Sharad Pawar factions of the Sena and the NCP, confident of the support they enjoyed in the organisation, had stressed the need to test organisational majority, while the rebel factions emphasised the need to test legislative majority.

It is important to note here that the rebel Trinamool group has claimed the support of two-thirds of the MLAs in the West Bengal Assembly, even as the two party factions engaged in claims and counterclaims over organisational matters such as adherence to the party constitution and election of office-bearers. There is intense speculation over whether the Trinamool dispute will be decided following the example of the Shiv Sena and NCP cases.

"The founder of a political party does not get extra points in such cases. The question is whether the decisions are taken in accordance with the constitution of these parties and their by-laws," Krishnamurthy said.

**The ECI's approach in recent cases has exposed it to the criticism that its orders were passed in favour of parties that are either a part of the NDA or are close to the ruling BJP.**

The ECI's approach in recent cases has exposed it to the criticism that the orders have been passed in favour of parties that are either a part of the National Democratic Alliance or are close to the ruling BJP. Both the Eknath Shinde group of the Sena and the Ajit Pawar faction of the NCP went on to join the BJP-led government in Maharashtra.

Critics also question whether legislative strength alone can be a determining metric when organisational majority cannot be or has not been ascertained.

While hearing the Sharad Pawar faction's challenge to the ECI order, the Supreme Court on March 19, 2024, observed: "When the Election Commission is recognising a faction only on the basis of legislative strength and not organisational strength, is it not recognising a split, which is no longer approved under the Tenth Schedule? That way, you can engineer defections and claim the party symbol. Will it not be a mockery of voters?" This observation seems to echo the concerns raised by critics of the ECI's decisions.

**A BENCH HEADED** by the then Chief Justice of India, D.Y. Chandrachud, made similar remarks while hearing the petition filed by Uddhav Thackeray's Sena faction over the defection by Shinde and others. "In arriving at this decision, it is not necessary for the ECI to rely on the test of majority in the legislature alone. In cases such as the present one, it would be futile to assess which group enjoys majority in the legislature. Rather, the ECI must look to other tests... [which] may include an evaluation of the majority in the organisational wings of the political party, an analysis of the provisions of the party constitution, or any other appropriate test," the court said in its order on May 11, 2023.

Krishnamurthy said the present situation is vague and nebulous and there is a need for a self-contained law regulating political parties, which would also stipulate the course of action for deciding party disputes due to splits. "No party seems to be serious about such a reform. None is raising the issue except when the fight reaches the ECI or the court. True, each political party has its party constitution and by-laws, but certain uniform standards have to be prescribed by law to avoid the present confusion and ambiguity," he said. ■

[ MANI TALK ]

**MANI SHANKAR AIYAR** Is a four-time MP, former diplomat, and author of several books.

# When governments refuse to talk, citizens will

Track 2 initiatives by citizens who want to keep the candle burning even when governments are spreading darkness everywhere bring ordinary Indians and Pakistanis together.

Someone in the Narendra Modi establishment thought up the alliteration, “Talks and terror can’t go together.” And the establishment converted that into policy. Therefore, there has been no intergovernmental engagement with Pakistan for the best part of 12 years. Talks have stopped. But terror has not. Being stuck in the rut is, therefore, the Modi government’s singular accomplishment in foreign policy.

It is only after we entered this impasse that I embarked on Track 2. I never believed that personal conversations with friends and acquaintances and new faces from across the border would translate into government policy. I was, therefore, a reluctant signatory to an “Open Letter” prepared after several rounds of conversation with over a hundred Pakistanis and Indians, known and unknown, at the initiative of Shri O.P. Shah, who chairs the Kolkata-based Centre for Peace and Progress.

He is a humble man, a retiring man, so retiring that even after decades of knowing him, I do not know what his initials, O and P, stand for! He has no pretensions to political position or official policymaking. But as a person of bountiful goodwill, he is anxious to make a humanitarian contribution to conflict resolution without expectation of personal reward or even any recognition. He is well-off but not wealthy.

When he travels to trouble spots, he bears his own expenses. And expects those who travel with him to do the same. For all his shying away from the spotlight, or perhaps because of it, his range of contacts in Kashmir and Pakistan is amazing. Because of him, I, who boast of friendship with a number of Pakistanis and Kashmiris, have been introduced to scores of others, some in person, others on Zoom. OP speaks little but hears a lot. I, to my detriment, speak too much and hear too little.

So, despite my reservations, I signed on, not because I thought it would give the two Prime Ministers their eureka moment but because I wanted to reciprocate the solidarity I had sensed.

In consequence, my fellow signatories and I have received the brickbats we anticipated. We have been accused of being wanting in patriotism and harbouring anti-national sentiments; of that worst sin of all, “*tushtikaran*”, or the appeasement of evil; of subverting our elected government, which knows more and governs better; of burying the history of repeated betrayal by Pakistan of pledges made to us; of unforgivable naïveté in not recognising revenge and malice as the engine of Pakistani motivation; of refusing to learn from experience of the visceral hatred of India and Hindus, which animates the Pakistanis’ jihadi souls; of brushing aside the many insults and injuries heaped on us by our malevolent neighbour; of being unmindful of the horrors without end that terrorism inflicts upon its blameless victims and their families and friends; of, indeed, sleeping with the enemy.

So, I would like to use this column to explain why I seize every opportunity I can to engage with Pakistanis and Kashmiris, even with no expectation that anyone in authority will listen to one word of what we urge.

First, because I want to.

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Next, because the Constitution protects my right to dissent. I am under no obligation to agree with my government or the majority who support the government.

Third, as a responsible citizen of a democracy I prize, I have a duty to air my contrary view, if only to have it contested in public.

More important, my entitlement to a view imposes on me a moral obligation to justify the causes of my dissent and discontent. So, here goes:

WHILE THE REST OF the world shakes its head in bewilderment, India and Pakistan glare at each other like cats in an alley and actually regard it as an achievement that they have not sat across a table for a decade and more. This is described as cold, calculated strategy, a just reprisal for 1,200 years of disruption of our civilisational advance, of a millennium of humiliation, hurt, and injury, a strategy to bring the enemy to his knees begging to be forgiven.

And such a goal is trotted out as realistic, pragmatic, and, indeed, Chanakyan in its cleverness because, as the RSS ideologue Ram Madhav said, by talking to everyone but Pakistan, we have rendered that enemy country frustrated and isolated. He is referring to the Pakistan whose Field Marshal is feted in the White House; a Pakistan that the White House feels honoured to promote from being its innkeeper in Islamabad to trusted mediator in President Donald Trump's most important foreign war to date.

It is also the Pakistan that is wooed by the US, China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the Sunni Arab states, and Shia Iran. Our government deeply believes that its self-serving portrayal of Pakistan as a failed state with a flailing economy surviving on handouts, of a country poised on the "edge of an abyss", imploding as tribal, linguistic, and ethnic and religious strife sweep away Jinnah's bogus "nation", oppressed under the heel of its military dictators, avenging themselves for our snatching Bangladesh from their embrace. It is a comforting justification for hatemongering.

Never mind that no one publicly stands up for India's dark portrait of Pakistan. Yet, Modi, who promotes himself as the world's principal slayer of terrorism, looks with benevolence on Israel's sponsorship of state-ordered military terrorism in Gaza, its state-propagated ethnic hate as a model to be emulated. As for Afghanistan, since Kautilya said that a neighbour is ever an enemy but the neighbour's neighbour a friend, the Modi-Jaishankar *jugalbandi* is thrilled the two neighbours to our west are engaged in a bloody war fought directly between themselves and through proxy terrorists. This, believes the godi media, shows that talks and war are perfectly kosher; only talks and terror are incompatible.

▶ **US Vice President** J.D. Vance with Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff Field Marshal Asim Munir, next to Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, during high-level talks aimed at advancing a deal to end the conflict in West Asia, at the Bürgenstock Resort Lake Lucerne in Switzerland on June 21. NATHAN HOWARD/REUTERS

We ordinary citizens seek to talk because our governments' efforts are in such a shambles. We do not ignore history. We try, instead, to spot distortions in the narrative, persuaded that "truth and reconciliation" is the road to "trust and rehabilitation". If governments filled with ill-will will not talk, why should people filled with goodwill not do so? For, "We, the People" are obliged by our citizenship to discharge our duty to keep the candle burning even when, or especially when, governments are spreading darkness everywhere. We explore constructive alternatives, if only for our own satisfaction.

We would prefer to do so within the large and bountiful space of our shared subcontinent, but because the very governments that baulk at talking to each other will not let us get on with talking to each other here at home, we are obliged to escape to more hospitable climes outside our fractured subcontinent. That both limits our numbers and makes us dependent on others' hospitality.

It also makes meetings more cumbersome by having to travel days for a few hours of interaction. Happily, technology has made possible a less burdensome and inexpensive medium: Zoom.

The Modi and Munir governments might yet work out ways of blocking Zoom or similar channels of communication. But until they do, 61 ordinary Indians and 56 common or garden Pakistanis have had the gall, as responsible citizens of their respective countries, to request both Prime Ministers to please exchange High Commissioners and get their envoys going, just to sound out whether there is a way forward through discussion and dialogue, preferably "uninterrupted and uninterruptible".

Both our governments encourage dialogue and diplomacy among other combatants. Why not declare "This is not an era of war" in our subcontinent? ■

UGC ROLL BACK
काला कानून वापस लो
मोदी जी
सवर्ण एकता
जिन्दाबाद
सवर्ण एकता
जिन्दाबाद

▶ **At a protest** by Brahmins against the proposed UGC equity guidelines, in Lucknow on January 29, 2026. The Supreme Court stayed the implementation of the guidelines. SANDEEP SAXENA

# BJP BATTLES BRAHMIN OUTRAGE

The BJP's Brahmin vote bank in the Hindi heartland is restive, and that could have serious ramifications for the party's 2027 Assembly election prospects. **ANAND MISHRA**

The fault lines between the BJP and its Brahmin supporters in the Hindi heartland are widening, which the saffron party can only ignore at its peril. The growing rift has been evident in the outrage over the killing of Bharat Bhushan Tiwari in a police encounter in Bihar's Bhojpur district on June 17, which spiralled into a caste debate; protests over the denial of a byelection ticket to Narottam Mishra in Madhya Pradesh; and the political get-togethers of Brahmins in Uttar Pradesh, where many community leaders have voiced unhappiness over how they are being treated.

These developments, coming barely six to eight months before the Uttar Pradesh Assembly election, have created a tough challenge for the BJP, which is aware that its privileged-caste constituency is restive, especially after the recent uproar against the saffron party over the University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026, which recommended strict measures to check and punish caste discrimination on university campuses.

While Brahmins account for 10-12 per cent of the total electorate in Uttar Pradesh, their corresponding share in Madhya Pradesh is 5-6 per cent, and in Bihar it is 3.65 per cent, the largest within the general category in the State.

"We are the ones who stood behind the BJP like a solid rock. Who built the party in Bihar? Leaders like Tarakant Jha, Vinod Naryan Jha, Gopal Jee Thakur, Ashwini Choubey, and Mithilesh Tiwari stood with the party through thick

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and thin. And now we are being fired at," a BJP leader from the Brahmin community said on condition of anonymity, reflecting the angst within the community over Bharat Tiwari's killing and the overall feeling of neglect of Brahmins in the party. Bharat Bhushan Tiwari of Bilauti village in Bhojpur district was killed in a police encounter on the morning of June 17. Outrage over the issue soon assumed a caste colour, with some people saying he was killed because he was a "Tiwari" (denoting Brahmin). At the same time, a few people, including a Union Minister from the State, wondered why similar rage is not expressed when people from Dalit and Muslim communities are killed.

This year the BJP anointed its first Chief Minister in Bihar, Samrat Choudhary—who belongs to the Kushwaha caste (part of the Other Backward Classes, or OBCs)—after Nitish Kumar, leader of the Janata Dal (United), or JD(U), announced his retirement from State politics, quitting as Chief Minister after more than two decades and accepting a Rajya Sabha nomination.

**NITISH KUMAR HAD** performed a fine balancing act as the head of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in the State, keeping both OBC and Dalit voters, as well as general category voters (who mainly voted for the BJP), happy. The BJP-JD(U) coalition in Bihar was not just a political arrangement; over the years it had transformed into a seamless social coalition.

On May 7, within a month of Choudhary taking oath as Chief Minister, senior BJP leader Mithilesh Tiwari, a prominent Brahmin leader, was made the State's Education Minister, while former Chief Minister Jagannath Mishra's son Nitish Mishra was made Minister of Urban Development and Housing Department.

As the reaction over Bharat Tiwari's killing threatened to rip apart the NDA's constituency of Brahmin supporters, Nitish Kumar made unusually strong comments condemning the trend of extrajudicial killings, trying to ensure that the government was not seen as anti-Brahmin. Also, old videos resurfaced on social media of Choudhary saying: "Brahmins were superior yesterday and are superior today, and Bihar will run under your guidance." Clearly, the BJP will do everything it can to keep its traditional voter base intact.

Meanwhile, in Madhya Pradesh, thousands of supporters of Narottam Mishra clashed with the police on July 11 in Datia district after the former Minister was denied a ticket for the July 30 Datia byelection. They blocked NH-44 for nearly 12 hours in protest. This happened after the BJP announced Ashutosh Tiwari's candidature for the byelection, ignoring claims by Mishra, a senior Brahmin leader of the party who has often in the past stoked controversy with his remarks.

**In Uttar Pradesh, Brahmins are not only voters but also influencers, shaping the political opinions of many others.**

While Tiwari is a debutant in this election, Mishra is a three-term MLA from Datia. A fourth win would have placed him as a serious contender for a senior position in the State Cabinet. Tiwari was considered close to former Chief Minister Uma Bharti, a prominent OBC leader and the Hindutva face of the 1990s.

Mishra later visited New Delhi, where he reportedly met party president Nitin Nabin and accepted the decision. Before the reconciliation, senior leaders such as Madhya Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Jagdish Devda and Mahendra Singh, the BJP in-charge for the State, visited Datia and met with Tiwari.

There were reports of Mishra's run-ins with senior State party leaders. In Mishra's refusal to blame anyone, this was more than apparent. "No, I don't blame the organisation, nor do I blame the Chief Minister. I do not point fingers at anyone. I believe that there must have been some shortcoming on my part. I will introspect and improve myself," he said after the reconciliation.

This happened despite Tiwari having earlier said: "Mishra is a very senior leader, my guardian, and he said he will campaign for the party and me."

Mishra lost the seat to the Congress' Rajendra Bharti in the 2023 Assembly election. The byelection was necessitated after Bharti's legislative membership was cancelled in April 2026 following his conviction in a 2015 bank fraud case. Mishra was considered the natural choice for the BJP.

*Rajendra Bharti has won from the Datia Assembly thrice, first in 1985, later in 1998, and then again in 2023.*

After winning the 2023 election in Madhya Pradesh, the BJP sprang a surprise by appointing the relatively less-known Mohan Yadav as Chief Minister as part of its outreach to OBCs, ignoring the claims of many seniors, including Narottam Mishra.

Earlier in July, an ongoing power tussle between Chief Minister Yadav and Urban Development and Housing and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kailash Vijayvargiya, currently the most prominent Brahmin leader within the party,

reached a new level after a letter written by him to the Chief Minister became public. In the letter he alleged that officials in the departments headed by him were being transferred without his knowledge and that over the past two and a half years, he had received only non-cooperation, neglect, and opposition.

Vijayvargiya, an MLA from Indore, was among the top contenders for the Chief Minister's post when the BJP considered replacing Shivraj Singh Chouhan as Chief Minister after the 2023 election. Mohan Yadav represents the Ujjain South Assembly seat, close to Indore, which is considered the financial capital of Madhya Pradesh.

The tussle is reportedly for turf control as both Mohan Yadav and Vijayvargiya hail from the same region. In June this year, reports emerged that the Chief Minister's family members had bought plots in Ujjain in zones benefiting from the proposed infrastructure push in the region under the Ujjain Master Plan 2035.

**BUT THE BIGGEST** Brahmin backlash that the BJP is facing is in election-bound Uttar Pradesh, where keeping the community in good humour, given the old Thakur-versus-Brahmin rivalry, especially in eastern Uttar Pradesh (known as Purvanchal), is a tightrope walk.

In January this year, a Provincial Civil Service officer in Uttar Pradesh named Alankar Agnihotri, who was then posted as Bareilly City Magistrate, had publicly protested by putting out a photograph of himself with a poster that termed the UGC equity regulations as a "Black Law" and demanded their withdrawal. He had expressed apprehension that they would lead to harassment of general category students.

▼ **The Shankaracharya** of Jyotish Peeth, Swami Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati, and his followers on a protest after he was reportedly stopped by the police from taking a dip in the Ganga, in Prayagraj on January 27. RAJESH KUMAR SINGH/AP

His poster also condemned the "insult" to Swami Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati, the Shankaracharya of Jyotish Peeth, at the Maagh Mela in Prayagraj in January this year and called for boycotting the BJP, alleging that an "anti-Brahmin campaign" was going on in the Uttar Pradesh government. Charging him with "indiscipline and defying service rules", the government suspended him hours after he announced his resignation.

On December 23 last year, a group of disgruntled Brahmin MLAs and MLCs of the BJP held a meeting in Lucknow at the house of senior party leader Panchanand Pathak, shortly after the party appointed Pankaj Chaudhary, from an OBC community, as its State president.

(The show of strength came six months after a meeting of 40 Thakur MLAs in Lucknow in August that year.)

This gave Samajwadi Party (SP) leader Akhilesh Yadav an opportunity to fish in troubled waters. He said the BJP does not respect the tilak (the mark on the forehead worn by Brahmins) and, provoking the Brahmins, added that a self-respecting society always chooses honour over power. Akhilesh Yadav has maintained that his party has always honoured the Brahmin com-

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munity and has attended Brahmin conferences.

BJP leader and Deputy Chief Minister Brajesh Pathak has, of late, been meeting influential members of the Brahmin community in the State as the party seeks to address their grievances.

**IN UTTAR PRADESH, BRAHMINS** are not only voters but also influencers, shaping the political opinions of many others. When the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) came to power with a massive majority in 2007, the party, in the run-up to the election, had made a huge outreach to the community, organising Brahmin Bhaichara Sammelans and coining slogans such as "*Brahman shankh bajayega, Haathi badhta jaayega* [Brahmins will blow the conch and the elephant (the BSP's symbol) will march ahead]."

In the past, Uttar Pradesh has seen many prominent Brahmin leaders as Chief Ministers, including Govind Ballabh Pant, Kamlapati Tripathi, Hemwati Nandan Bahuguna, Sripati Mishra, and Narayan Dutt Tiwari. Most of them were from the Congress. After the era of Mandal-Mandir politics, Brahmins moved lock, stock, and barrel to the BJP as the Congress went into a terminal decline. Since then, there have been Chief Ministers from the Thakur, Vaishya, OBC, and Dalit communities, but none from the Brahmin community in the last 37 years.

Sharat Pradhan, a Lucknow-based political analyst and author, said that the primary reason for the visible disillusionment among Brahmins with the BJP in Uttar Pradesh was the growing perception of Chief Minister Adityanath government's "thakurvaad", marked by domination of Thakurs.

Speaking to *Frontline*, he said: "This got compounded with the gunning down of some Brahmin criminals, the most infamous of them all being Vikas Dubey, whose killing was seen as part of a deliberate design. Even though Dubey never enjoyed that kind of popularity with the Brahmin community, the shabbily carried out encounter by the Uttar Pradesh police aroused sympathy from the community."

Dubey's encounter took place in 2020, and the BJP was able to address and contain much of the Brahmins' anger before the 2022 Assembly election, which it won for the second consecutive time. Pradhan said that since Brahmins remained the "privileged" section in successive regimes, they could not digest the emergence of Thakurs as the ruling dispensation's blue-eyed boys, particularly their holding key positions in the police force, which is considered a yardstick of clout enjoyed by communities in a caste-ridden State.

"While Thakurs and Brahmins have traditionally been at loggerheads in UP politics, the battle lines were never as sharply drawn as they appear today," Pradhan said.

**The neglect of Brahmins in the Adityanath administration is a common refrain among Brahmin legislators in Uttar Pradesh.**

**THE BJP'S BIGGEST** challenge in Uttar Pradesh is countering the SP's Pichchda, Dalit, Alpsankhyak pitch by reaching out to backward sections, Dalits, and minorities even while keeping its Brahmin, baniya, and other privileged-caste votes intact.

The neglect of Brahmins in the Adityanath administration is a common refrain among Brahmin legislators. Sanjay Pandey, a Lucknow-based senior journalist who has tracked the State's politics for nearly three decades, said: "There seems to be a perceptible anger in the Brahmin community against the Yogi Adityanath government in Uttar Pradesh. I think the anger stems from several factors. Brahmins, in general, feel marginalised under the Adityanath government."

He added: "Humiliation of Shankaracharya Avimukteshwaranand and mistreatment of batuks [young Brahmin students studying in gurukulas] by the police only accentuated the resentment. The way the batuks were dragged by their *shikha* [tufts] added to their anger." He also pointed out to Alankar Agnihotri's resignation as an event that reflected this anger.

"Deputy Chief Minister Brijesh Pathak was forced to perform a batuk puja with 101 batuks, apparently in a damage control exercise. The community was also peeved by the new UGC regulations. At the meeting of the Brahmin MLAs of the BJP, many legislators said that their community members were being insulted and that the administration turned a blind eye to their concerns," Pandey added.

According to Pandey, Bharat Tiwari's encounter killing in Bihar may hurt the BJP's chances in the border districts in Uttar Pradesh such as Ballia, Deoria, and Ghazipur, but the denial of the ticket to Narottam Mishra in Madhya Pradesh will not have any impact in the election-bound State, where the SP and the Congress fancy their chances and will go the extra mile to deny the BJP a third successive term. ■

# Reaching out to the frenemy

A strategy based on the policy prescription that India should open its doors to Chinese investment to give its ailing manufacturing sector a boost could turn out to be futile. Instead, we should discipline domestic capital and leverage our huge market.

**C.P. Chandrasekhar**

Once again, the updated statistics of trade between China and India is a cause for concern. While trade between the two countries continues to expand, the increased exports from China to India with little growth in the opposite direction is what is worrying. Over the first six months of 2026, while aggregate trade (exports from China to India plus imports from India by China) grew by 24 per cent to $91.7 billion, India's exports to China, despite a 37 per cent rise, accounted for just $12.3 billion of the total. As a result, the deficit in India's trade with China amounted to $67.1 billion.

This unequal trade relationship between the two countries is also reflected in the composition of trade. India imports a range of intermediate and final manufactured goods from China, especially electronic equipment such as mobile phones, integrated circuits, and computers but exports semi-processed raw materials like iron ore and refined petroleum. That is reflective of the unequal relations in global trade that characterised under-developed countries emerging out of colonial domination after the Second World War. Yet, for years now, the government and policymakers in India have revelled in being clubbed with China as the emerging Asian majors that are set to challenge the economic leadership of the US and its allies. The odd label "Chindia" was deployed by those not wanting to give China, with its ambiguous status between being state-controlled and market-driven, its aggressive nationalism and its rising economic prowess, sole credit for transforming the international economic order established after the Second World War.

Of course, the stark differences in the level of development, degree of structural diversification, and technological advance between the two countries could not be ignored. Moreover, unlike China, India's manufacturing sector, a key barometer of economic strength, has seen limited development.

Not surprisingly, even while adopting a neoliberal economic policy stance, the Narendra Modi government, for more than a decade, made the development of manufacturing a central policy plank. However, this was defined as a "Make in India" strategy, suggesting that the thrust was to invite transnational firms to use India as the base for producing for the global market. The expectation was that the developed countries, for security reasons, would likely limit imports from China and reduce their dependence on production chains originating there. It was presumed that India would be the principal beneficiary of the diversification of import sources labelled the "China+1" strategy. Those expectations have been belied.

**IN THAT CONTEXT,** in a surprising development, an economist with past and current links with high-level policymaking in India has openly acknowledged the unequal relationship between China and India. Rakesh Mohan, currently a member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council and a former RBI Deputy Governor, has urged India to invite export-oriented Chinese investment. Such investment would help earn foreign exchange that would reduce India's trade deficit with China and boost exports of manufactured goods needed to mend India's chronically deficit balance of merchandise trade.

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In recent decades, that deficit has been partly covered by India's receipts of remittances and export of software and IT-enabled services. But the merchandise trade deficit has been rising because of the volatility in oil prices and India's overall oil import bill, and there are signs that net receipts from services are beginning to shrink. Moreover, trade protectionism under US President Donald Trump, a policy being slavishly imitated by Western Europe, is constricting India's export access to those markets.

Mohan's recommendation, as reported by Bloomberg, is clear. In his view, India should open the door to greater Chinese investment as shifting geopolitics makes the US a less dependable partner. Instead of relying on protectionist policies, India should leverage its low manufacturing wages to attract capital from China to create jobs and boost exports in labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, garments, footwear, and furniture.

In pursuit of such a strategy, Mohan recommends that India reconsider its stance on regional trade pacts, especially the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement, negotiations that India withdrew from on the grounds that it would be exploited by China to invade Indian markets. It is true that, even without RCEP support, China has increased its presence in Indian markets, facilitated by India's need for cheap imports from the country.

THERE CANNOT BE a more candid acceptance of the relative positions of the two countries in technology, trade, and potential partnership efforts. There is no reason to expect that the government would listen to this advice.

Nor is it clear that, given the history of border and geopolitical tensions, Chinese firms and the Chinese government would choose India for relocation of production since they have many such options in South-East Asia, South Asia, and even Africa and Latin America. The pursuit of a strategy of development dependent on Chinese investment in export-oriented production facilities as a substitute for development based on dependence on the US, South Korea, and Japan (besides Europe) could be one more futile exercise.

▶ **A garment factory** in Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu. India failed to grow its domestic market by addressing asset and income inequality. FRANCIS MASCARENHAS/REUTERS

Strategies such as these are merely efforts to settle for the soft option when it comes to industrialisation. A feasible strategy would involve the state disciplining domestic capital and leveraging India's large market to build the indigenous technological capability and strength to grow as well as earn the foreign exchange needed to support that development effort.

At Independence, India was seen as the country that showed the most promise as one that could make the industrial transition. It had one of the largest domestic markets among countries exiting from colonial rule and the benefits of a century of factory-based industrialisation under the British, with a role for domestic capital in that process. It failed in that project initially because it failed to grow its domestic market by addressing asset and income inequality. It subsequently undermined much of its early strengths by pursuing growth as a subordinate producer seeking investments from globally mobile industrial capital.

It is time to rethink the strategy in entirely different ways and return to the task of redeeming the post-Independence promise that remains unrealised. ■

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**India undermined much of its early strengths by pursuing growth as a subordinate producer seeking investments from globally mobile industrial capital.**

▶ **A Pakistani delegation** of educators at a meeting with heads of educational institutions and civil society members organised by the Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation (Mumbai) and Lahore University of Management Studies, in Bengaluru on October 16, 2013. K. MURALI KUMAR

World Affairs

# FIRST PRINCIPLES OF TRACK 2 DIPLOMACY

Track 2 meetings do bring a valuable theoretical and methodological understanding to interstate relations, but one must be cautious about classifying them under “diplomacy”. **VIVEK KATJU**

In the absence of official dialogue between India and Pakistan, the Indian media have been looking for signals that might indicate that Track 2 engagements between individuals of the two countries are leading to a change in its policy of no talks with Pakistan until it gives up terror. This has especially been the case after RSS general secretary Dattatreya Hosabale remarked, in May, that Indian and Pakistani academics, professionals, and civil society members should meet. Reports that BJP general secretary Ram Madhav had participated in a Track 2 event in Colombo in June where Pakistanis were present also reinforced the speculation.

Madhav later clarified that he had only briefly taken part in an “annual South Asia conference” that a “prestigious London-based think tank” has been hosting for more than a decade. In these conferences, according to Madhav, “scholars, former diplomats, military and intelligence agency veterans, and, occasionally, politicians and serving officials from

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**International relations scholars have felt that new informal mechanisms must be specially devised to address contentious bilateral or multilateral issues.**

South Asia and beyond participate”. He said that these conferences are like any other academic event hosted by think tanks. The fact, though, is that think tanks seldom organise academic events since their focus is on state or interstate policies.

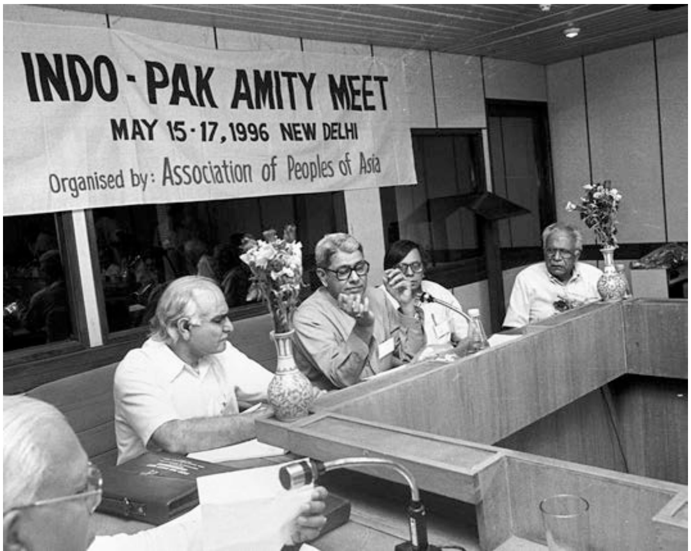
Madhav further justified his stand by stating the implication of Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri’s comment that the Colombo event in which he had taken part was not part of Track 2 diplomacy. Madhav said that Track 2 diplomacy is a “bilateral dialogue track that has the tacit approval of the governments”. His words have to be seriously examined, not least because he is also the president of India Foundation, a well-known BJP-affiliated think tank. But, before that, a consideration of what Misri said.

When asked about the Colombo meeting, Misri remarked that there was no official involvement, support, or participation in the event. The Indians who had participated in it, who were “distinguished” retired diplomats, military officials, or members of civil society, spoke for “themselves”. He also remarked that “dozens” of such events take place on “dozens” of subjects and there was nothing new or special about them. He finally said that, as Foreign Secretary, “we take no cognisance of such events. They hold no value as far as we are concerned.”

The important point here is that while Misri did not categorise these events as Track 2, such events are not merely academic conferences. Moreover, while Track 2 events may take place with the knowledge of governments, they need not have–and indeed do not need–the support, tacit or otherwise, of governments.

A CONSIDERATION OF the nature and type of such informal engagements between individuals of countries that generally have problematic relations, on one issue or a range of issues, would lift the veil of obfuscation that currently surrounds them. But before that, a fundamental fact of international relations must be appreciated. Even with the current presence of influential multinational companies with unprecedented wealth and command over frontier technologies and NGOs that sway global opinion, states are the basic unit of international relations. The world order is determined by rules governing interstate relations that are set by powerful states. The present world order was established by the victors of the Second World War. It ensured their–particularly the US’–domination through rule-making and, sometimes, the exercise of naked power. That regime is now under strain because of the rise of China and other countries. Companies and NGOs may seek to influence states and interstate interplay, but final decisions are taken by states themselves.

The formal interaction of states bilaterally, multilaterally, and internationally is through established diplomatic norms, many of which are based on international conventions, agreements, and treaties. However, over the past six decades or so, international relations scholars have felt that, in addition to the time-honoured formal norms of interstate relations, new informal mechanisms have to be specially devised to address contentious bilateral or multilateral issues. There are scholars and practitioners who devote themselves not only to putting these mechanisms into practice but also to creating an entire branch of international relations studies to provide theoretical and methodological underpinnings to these


INDO-PAK AMITY MEET
MAY 15-17, 1996 NEW DELHI
Organised by: Association of Peoples of Asia

▼ **A meeting** of historians, academics, jurists, media persons, and writers from India and Pakistan exploring areas of cooperation to improve and strengthen ties, organised by the Association of Peoples of Asia, in New Delhi, on May 15, 1996.
K. MURALI KUMAR

mechanisms. Somewhat arrogantly, they have given this entire international relations corpus the misleading appellation of Track 2 diplomacy. This term is inherently contradictory because diplomacy is the formal and official conduct of interstate interaction only.

**WITHIN THE RUBRIC** of Track 2 diplomacy, there is the sub-term Track 1.5 diplomacy. Before an attempt is made to examine the distinction between the two terms, a basic clarification is necessary. This is because of the confusion surrounding a third term: backchannel diplomacy. This is sometimes considered to be a part of Track 2 processes, but that is far from correct. Backchannel interaction is a formal but "away from the public eye" process generally undertaken between the leaders of states through their specially appointed representatives. It bypasses normal diplomatic channels. Often, officials conducting backchannel talks report directly to the leaders, who, in turn, may constitute a consultative group to consider the often sensitive and contentious issue being discussed in the backchannel. A backchannel process may go on for many years.

One notable such exercise occurred between India and Pakistan from 2005 to 2014. It was ordered by the then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, and Pakistani President, Pervez Musharraf, and was meant to principally address the Jammu and Kashmir issue. Despite differing interpretations of how far it did go to find a resolution, the talks ultimately failed. Many conventional diplomats find backchannels of little use although they are favoured by several participants of the Track 2 circuit.

▼ **Families seeing off relatives** travelling on the India-bound Thar Express train, in Karachi, Pakistan, on August 9, 2019, after which train services between the two countries were stopped.
FAREED KHAN/AP

The essential idea of Track 2 exercises is to get "influential" people to talk on divisive issues on which the position of the respective governments has become frozen. Such talks are conducted by international relations Track 2 practitioners who encourage the "influentials" to gain confidence in each other and thereafter examine possibilities of moving away from officially stated positions so that the processes of resolving issues can begin. The assumption is that the "influentials" can put across the ideas they may have gained through their interaction with their counterparts directly to those in authority in their own country or in the public domain. It is only very rarely that Track 2 ideas shift congealed positions of a fundamental nature, such as in the issue of Jammu and Kashmir. Where they can occasionally play a role is in supplementing official efforts through clarifying positions, which falls in the domain of management through confidence-building measures.

Such international relations practitioners are encouraged and funded to hold these sessions, or a series of such sessions, by some Western governments. What is the interest of the funders? Generally, practitioners do not wish to focus on the interest of the donors, and the latter's object in funding Track 2 processes is certainly not the promotion of a branch of international relations studies. At one level, the funders consider these a part of

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**Track 2 processes can occasionally play a role in supplementing official efforts through clarifying positions, which falls in the domain of management through confidence-building measures.**

a management exercise that ensures that a contentious issue does not flare up into violence. It is, obviously, only one of the instruments that governments use to prevent and defuse conflicts. Naturally, the main channel of communication of even these Western governments would be with the official machinery of the contesting states.

THUS, THE PURPOSE behind governments currently funding Track 2 exercises exclusively for India-Pakistan sessions or exercises involving other participants is to generate sentiments and ideas that can ideally help prevent the flare-up of kinetic action as seen after the Pulwama and Pahalgam terrorist attacks. The aim is also to assess the extent of support among Track 2 participants for India's stance of no dialogue with Pakistan unless it abandons terror. Simultaneously, it is to ask how Track 2 participants feel a crisis can be defused if it breaks out.

While, over the decades, practitioners of Track 2 systems may have succeeded in some cases, their experience of moving India and Pakistan on paths they desire has been dismal. This has been so even though they have had Track 2 meetings among former intelligence officials. National Security Adviser Ajit Doval took part in one such session when he was not in office. Misri, too, has spoken about India's current approach to Track 2 events.

Track 1.5 events are different from Track 2. These are explorations between governments themselves through informal discussions between participants, many of whom have the approval of their governments to participate. These are also generally, although unofficially, funded by the participants' own governments. Their purpose is to gauge the attitude of the other side on bilateral ties and contentious issues as well as the possibilities for cooperation. They allow governments to present ideas that may be different from their official positions without any fear of attribution. These Track 1.5 engagements are held in confidence and do not have outsiders present. Views presented by the other side are communicated only to governments. Sometimes Track 1.5 sessions can provide opportunities to convey messages from one government to another; the advantage is that they are off the record. If there are positive responses from the other side, then the matter moves to the official level. There has been at least one Track 1.5 dialogue process between India and Pakistan that began in the 1990s and continued until around 2018. It involved men and women from different fields who were committed to an improvement in bilateral ties. The fact that a quarter century of this contact did not have any decisive influence on official policies also shows that such processes cannot always move national positions rooted in antagonistic ideologies. However, the dialogue did provide useful insights into some issues of internal governance.

Finally, the loyalties of the participants of Track 2 or Track 1.5 processes are sometimes suspected by sections of the media. This is uncharitable. These participants do not stand to gain in any manner except in getting direct knowledge of the thinking prevalent among the other side's participants. This gives them insights into unofficial and, sometimes, official thinking, which is useful in making assessments of the policies being pursued by the other country and also in providing a rough idea of its leadership. Beyond this, there is nothing at all in it for them. ■

Vivek Katju is a retired IFS officer. He served as the Ambassador to Afghanistan from March 2002 to January 2005.

▼ **Prime Minister Manmohan Singh** with Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf, when they were in Havana to attend the 14th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, on September 16, 2006. The backchannel exercise from 2005 to 2014 ordered by the two leaders to principally address the Jammu and Kashmir issue ultimately failed.
SUBHASH CHANDER MALHOTRA/PTI

▶ **Muslims gather** to pray during Eid al-Fitr at the Feroz Shah Kotla mosque in New Delhi, a file picture. On most socio-economic indicators, Muslims are on the margins of the structures of political, economic, and social relevance. R.V. MOORTHY

### Essay

# Seeking equity in a majoritarian society

The principal challenges confronting Indian Muslims now go beyond educational and economic disadvantage to questions of security, equal opportunity, and social acceptance, challenging the constitutional promise of equality and fraternity. **M. HAMID ANSARI**

Indian Muslims are citizens of India who profess Islam. They constitute 14.22 per cent of the population, are a minority numerically but equal legally, and are fraternal constitutionally. The story of their faith has been woven into the multireligious fabric of India for almost 14 centuries; together, these provide good reasons why the Muslims of India are unsubduable. As the Islamic scholar Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi put it: "They are determined to ensure for themselves an honourable place in the Indian sun."

In the 1940s, Wilfred Cantwell Smith observed: "The Indian Muslim community, bat-

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**The BJP's victory in 2014 ushered in a new era for India. Its adverse impact on normal social fraternity is increasingly visible and difficult to contain in many areas.**

tered by outward circumstances and gripped inwardly by dismay, had stood disconcerted, inhibited by effective self-recognition and by active vitality. Yet not only is the welfare of the community itself at stake now and for future generations. Also, the histories in solving its present and future of both India and Islam will in turn part on the success or failure of this community in solving its present problems, on its skill and wisdom in meeting the challenge of the today."

Some of the problems were of older vintage. G.R. Thursby, in his book (first published in the 1970s) *Hindu-Muslim Relations in British India* (1923-28), studied 112 riots classified as communal and perceived them as cow conflicts and music before mosques and as part of movements such as Shuddhi and Sangathan. He opined that all these and the Communal Award of 1932 became "landmark on a trek towards the partition of India and Pakistan".

A political cause of social backwardness of Muslims in pre-Partition days was suggested by B.R. Ambedkar in 1940:

"Muslims in India are placed in a political environment which is also predominantly Hindu. He feels he will be suppressed and that political suppression will make Muslims a depressed class. It is this consciousness that he has to save himself from being submerged by Hindus socially and politically, which to my mind is the primary cause why Indian Muslims... are backward in matters of social reform."

The past eight decades since Independence bear witness to the scorecard of lamentations that came early and were widespread. As in the period after 1857, Muslims perceived radical change in the political order amidst political and social disorder as a threat to old ways of living.

This was reflected candidly in Jawaharlal Nehru's letter of April 26, 1954, to Chief Ministers on the question of minorities:

*Census data show that in 1951, there were 3.54 crore Muslims in the country, accounting for 9.8 per cent of the population.*

> "Our Constitution is very good and our laws and rules and regulations are also fair. But the fact remains that in practice some of our minorities, and notably Muslims, suffer from a deep sense of frustration. They feel that the services are not really open to them in any marked degree, whether defence, police or civil. In business, the evacuee property laws, which unfortunately continue even though they are not applied frequently, bear down upon them and restrict their opportunities. In elections to our Assemblies and Parliament, it is not easy for Muslims to come in. Even in our public organizations, it is becoming increasingly difficult for proper Muslim representation."

**AFTER DECADES OF AGITATION** about the Muslim condition, the Central government in 2006 established the Rajinder Sachar Committee "to prepare a report on the social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community in India". The committee's report suggested policies to deal with "the relative deprivation of the Muslim community" and said that the country "should sharply focus on inclusive development and 'mainstreaming' of the community while respecting diversity".

The decisions taken by the government on the recommendations of the Sachar Committee have been grouped under (i) Education; (ii) Skill Development; (iii) Access to credit; (iv) Special development initiatives; (v) Measures for affirmative action; (vi) Waqfs; and (vii) Miscellaneous.

The findings of the committee laid to rest the political untruth about the Muslim condition and asserted that on most socio-economic indicators they were on the margins of structures of political, economic, and social relevance, and their average condition was comparable to or even worse than the country's historically most acknowledged backward communities, namely the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The view has been expressed that Indian Muslims are "in danger of becoming second class citizens".

These findings specified the place of the majority of Muslims in regard to education, livelihood, and access to public services and the employment market across States.

Following it, Expert Group Reports were prepared in 2008 on the need to develop a Diversity Index and establish an Equal Opportunity Commission.

These studies brought forth sufficient evidence to substantiate the finding of the 2008 Expert Group Report on Diversity Index that "inequality traps prevent the marginalized and work in favour of dominant groups in society" because "unequal economic opportunities lead to unequal outcomes which in turn lead to unequal access to political power. This creates a vicious circle since unequal political power determines the nature and functioning of the institutions and their policies. These result in persistence of initial conditions.”

In September 2014, the Amitabh Kundu Committee report evaluated the progress made and concluded that though “a start has been made, yet serious bottlenecks remain”. It made some specific recommendations and asserted that “the development of the Muslim minority must be built on a bed-rock of a sense of security”.

Out of the 76 recommendations listed in the Sachar Committee report, the government of India approved 72. These included approval for the Communal Violence (Prevention, Control and Rehabilitation of Victims) Bill, 2005, aimed at empowering State and Central governments to take measures to provide for prevention and control of communal violence, which threatens the secular fabric, unity, integrity, and internal security of the nation, and rehabilitation of victims of such violence and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereof.

Two decades later it is yet to take the shape of legislation, clearly indicative of a lack of will.

Other measures included increasing the number of and grants for madrasas and schools in minority concentration areas, some for girls only; increasing the allocation for the minorities commission and the Waqf Board; increasing the number of Muslim teachers and health and police personnel at government cost; providing reservation and grants for and loans to Muslims; providing housing for Muslims; and ensuring representation of minorities in local bodies and the dissemination of available schemes in Urdu.

SAVE INDIA
STOP THE
VIOLENCE
AINST
DENTS
सभी का ख़ून
है शामिल यहां
की मिट्टी में
किसी के बाप का
हिंदोस्तान थोड़ी
LAAZIM HA
KI HUM
DEK
संविधान बचाओ
लोकतंत्र
बचाओ!
RYA
SABHI KA
KHOON HAI
SHAAMIL
YAHAAN KI
MITTI ME
ITIHAAS GAWAH HAI KI
DHARM KASHI KHATRE ME
THA HI NAHI
AGAR HOTA THO
NPR

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**During a protest against** the CAA at the Jamia Millia Islamia university in New Delhi on February 14, 2020.

SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

**A DIFFERENT VIEW,** reflective of the majoritarian ideology, was taken by the Gujarat government in November 2013 in its contention in the Supreme Court that the Rajinder Sachar Committee was “unconstitutional” and that it sought to help only Muslims. It has strongly criticised the manner in which the PMO set up the Sachar Committee in 2005 to survey the socio-economic conditions of Muslims while ignoring other religious minorities.

This affidavit was filed in response to the Centre’s stand that the scheme was valid and that the then Narendra Modi government was to blame for the deteriorating condition of Muslims in Gujarat.

### II

It is evident from the compendium of official reports that the principal problems confronting India’s Muslims relate to (a) identity and security, (b) education and empowerment, (c) equitable share in the largesse of the state, and (d) fair share in decision-making. Alongside, though less candidly articulated, are the perceptions and prejudices that document the intercommunity (principally Hindu-Muslim) relations in our society.

Over time, scholars have analysed them in identifiable categories. These relate to the following:

**Attitudinal prejudices:* Systematically cultivated attitudes of “otherness” and dislike of Muslims (and Christians) and propagating these among the public particularly at the time of elections and general ten-

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sions. Minority identities are being consciously distorted through the amendment or dilution of school curricula. Minorities are being told that they exist mainly on the goodwill of the majority. Much of it is premised deliberately on a distorted reading of history in the medieval period as also on events of 1947 and bestowing the sole responsibility for them on the Muslims.

**Security and physical safety concerns and impact on general well-being:* The data on Muslim over-representation in prisons is consistent and troubling. National Crime Records Bureau data show that Muslims constitute roughly 20 per cent of undertrial prisoners, above their 14-15 per cent share of the population. The same holds for their share in cases under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, and generally on their lower ability to furnish bail surety.

**OTHER ISSUES INCLUDE** communal riots, the suspected partiality of the police (with low to very low Muslim representation) and the administration, and a general sense of insecurity in minority pockets of the general population. Harassment on procedural grounds of community-run and self-financed primary and secondary educational institutions is another issue. Instances of personal law matters tend to proliferate in some States despite admonition by higher courts.

**Religious and cultural friction:* Muslims' expectation of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, which is designed to maintain communal harmony and retain the religious character of all places of worship as they existed at the time of Independence on August 15, 1947, has not been fulfilled. Objections persist to the observance of traditional religious rituals and customs in regard to visits to dargahs and shrines. Intolerance is seen of old or newer places of worship as are administrative steps to dismantle them. Other controversial issues relate to waqf legislation and movements such as the ones against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the National Register of Citizens, apart from objections to the use of loudspeakers in mosques for prayer calls.

The frequency and extent of demolitions of places of worship in Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh became the subject of a special meeting of all Muslim organisations in the last week of June. It expressed grave concern over demolitions and decided to launch a nationwide movement against social and political marginalisation of Muslims. Several State governments in recent years have used municipal demolition orders, known as "bulldozer justice", against properties belonging to individuals accused (but not convicted) of communal violence or other offences. The intervention of the Supreme Court has not been effective.

▶ **The Uttar Pradesh** government used a bulldozer to demolish the residence of Javed Ahmed, a local leader in Prayagraj who was allegedly the key behind violent protests held against a BJP leader's remarks on the Prophet, on June 12, 2022. PTI

**Recent happenings, like the Delhi riots of February 2020, show the emergence of hate as a state project to dehumanise a section of the populace.**

The periodicity of communal disturbances principally targeting Muslims (and at times Christians and other religious minorities) has been sufficiently recorded in official and scholarly publications that shed light on the communalisation of the administrative machinery (ethno-religious bias), which resulted in inadequate protection of the targets of riots.

The communalisation of the law and order machinery means that whenever public authority is pliant to anti-Muslim forces, the administration has offered weak or inadequate protection to the targets and the principal sufferers.

As early as 1981, a senior police officer named C.F. Rustamji observed that the communalisation of the administrative machinery was result-

ing in inadequate protection of the targets of riots. More recent happenings, like the Muzaffarnagar disturbances in 2013 and the Delhi riots of February 2020, show the emergence of hate as a state project to dehumanise a section of the populace and make them invisible.

Studies show that in 2025, 1,318 hate speech events targeting religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians, occurred across 21 States, 1 Union Territory, and the National Capital Territory of Delhi. On average, four hate speech events occurred per day.

This marks a 13 per cent increase from 2024, and a 97 per cent increase from 2023, when 668 such incidents were recorded.

This suggests an institutional normalisation of hate. Facebook groups have emerged as primary online hotbeds in nationalist communities where shared ideological interests facilitate the rapid circulation of inflammatory content.

**Demographic and social concerns:* Misplaced and/or distorted apprehensions persist about population growth, religious conversions and interfaith marriages, “love jihad”, “land jihad”, cross-border infiltration, plight of Muslim women, polygamy, and personal law. Debate continues on a uniform civil code with implications for Muslim personal autonomy and minority legal identity.

**Citizenship and documentation:* The experience of the Assam and West Bengal Assembly elections has raised serious concerns about the use of the Special Intensive Revision by the Election Commission of India.

Allegations of higher decadal rate of growth of minorities, repeatedly voiced, are not sustained by available data. They are nevertheless used politically to sustain the need to curtail Muslim numbers.

**Economic and social behaviour:* Commercial rivalry and its manifestation in daily life; local restrictions on commercial practice on grounds of faith; and relatively lower representation of Muslims in government services, particularly in the armed forces, are indicators of economic and social marginalisation of Muslims. For decades, Muslim communities have faced discrimination in employment and education and encountered barriers to achieving wealth and political power.

**THE BJP’S VICTORY** in 2014 ushered in a new era for India. This stage of Indian democracy, characterised by populism, marked a transition to “ethnic democracy” and authoritarianism, making India into a de facto Hindu rashtra. Its adverse impact on normal social fraternity is increasingly visible and difficult to contain in many areas.

Given the dimensions of the problem and perhaps responding to it in some measure, Prime Minister Narendra Modi articulated the motto: “*Sab ka saath, sabka vikas*”. He left unsaid the ground reality on the unavoidable need to ensure that all participants in a race be at the starting point together to ensure a semblance of fairness and equality.

He said elsewhere: “The message today is to connect, to get connected and to live together.” Here too the specifics of the ingredients, individually and groupwise, were not mentioned and the unstated assumption would appear to be that what is good for the majority must necessarily be beneficial to all.

There is, thus, an urgent need to expand and indigenise our discourse on democracy. The political scientists D.L. Sheth and Ashis Nandy observed in 1995 that “the use of coercive pow-

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er of the state for effective homogenization in society and counter-violence by the political-cultural entities resisting such incursions of the state constitute the problem for the political system in India today." This is truer today than when it was written.

Writing in *The Indian Express* in June this year, Neerja Chowdhury posed a question that needs to be answered: "Will Modi now shift gears and try to win Muslim opinion to his side in a true spirit of *Sabka saath, sabka vikas?* His dream of Viksit Bharat by 2047 can hardly be achieved if 200 million Muslims are alienated. India's diversity not only holds the country but is an inherent aspect of its democracy."

### III

**WHERE LIE THE** correctives to the Muslim condition? These would seem to be

(a) with Muslims themselves in all their regional and sectarian diversity

(b) with the state and with its multifarious agencies, and

(c) with society at large to the extent it absorbs the correctives or aberrations of the earlier two and refrains from succumbing to their negative impact directly or through indoctrination and social media.

A candid assessment of the community in its size and regional spread is necessary. Of the 28 States and 8 Union Territories that constitute the Union of India, 15 have Muslim populations of over 9 per cent; of these, 12 have over 10 per cent. These numbers are broadly and traditionally divided between the Sunnis and the Shias.

Sunnis form the vast majority of the Muslim numbers, accounting for roughly 85-90 per cent of all adherents. Shias are a significant minority, accounting for an estimated 10-15 per cent (around 20 million). In addition, there are around 5,00,000 Dawoodi Bohras and about 1 million Ahmadis.

For many of these and in varying degrees, a poet's summing up of an inherent trait holds good:

*Firrqa-bandi hai kahin aur kahin zaatain hain,*
*Kya zamaane main panapne ki yahi baatain hain?*

Today we have to admit that both these ailments are ground realities. Missing in the process is domestic cohesion within sections of the community. How adequate is the response to the challenge they face?

**It is evident that significant sections of the community remain trapped in a vicious circle and in a culturally defensive posture that hinders self-advancement.**

It is evident that significant sections of the community remain trapped in a vicious circle and in a culturally defensive posture that hinders self-advancement. Tradition is made sacrosanct, but the rationale of tradition is all but forgotten. *Jadeediyat*, or modernity, has become a tainted expression.

*Raah-e khuddari se mar kar bhi bhatak sakte nahin*
*Toot to sakte hain hum, lekin lachak sakte nahin*

Such a mindset constrains the critical thinking necessary both for the affirmation of faith and for the well-being of the community.

Muslims are fellow citizens in a larger conglomerate and have to be viewed in terms of capabilities and handicaps in regard to social functions. Foremost amongst these are education and social skills.

The instrumentality, within canons of tradition, of adaptation to change, or *ijtihad,* is frowned upon or glossed over. Forgotten is its

▶ **Waiting to cast their vote** during the election of the Telangana State Waqf Board, in Hyderabad on February 28, 2022.
G. RAMAKRISHNA

purpose, defined by Sheikh Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi as “the ability to cope with the ever-changing pattern of life’s requirements”.

Equally relevant is Imam Al-Ghazali’s delineation of the ambit of “maslaha”: necessitating protection of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property. Both provide ample theoretical space for focussed thinking on social change without impinging on the fundamentals of faith.

Available data of primary and school-leaving students of both sexes, of college graduates, and of female employment make evident the gap in comparison with national levels. On the basis of the 2011 Census, 42.72 per cent of the Muslim population was illiterate; while 57.28 per cent was literate, only 2.76 per cent were graduates and above.

Comparison with the national average, and with the data relating to other minorities, highlights the educational backwardness of the Muslim community. The default above all is in the area of primary education.

**DATA SHOW THAT** the share of Muslim enrolment in 2021-22, which was 52 per cent in primary grades, was 26.31 per cent in upper primary grades, 13.27 per cent in secondary grades, and 8.40 per cent in higher secondary grades. The latter corresponding figures were much lower in 2012-13.

Despite this progress, the gross enrolment ratio of Muslim students in higher education remains significantly lower, around 5.2 per cent compared with the national average of 27.3 per cent.

The picture is grimmer with regard to women. Data published by the UN show that gender inequality is a major cause and effect of hunger and poverty and that about 60 per cent of the chronically hungry people are women and girls. In 2009-10, 34.7 per cent of rural and 19.8 per cent of urban Muslim women had never attended school. Less than 10 per cent had completed schooling. Out of Indian women participating in the workforce, 70 per cent are Hindu and 29 per cent are Muslim.

Education is a serious issue. While the literacy rate among Muslims is showing an upward graph, the higher education dropout rate is a major problem since education is directly linked to income levels and economic levels are dependent on employment and wealth generation. A vicious circle has thus developed in which many in the community are generally trapped.

Assessment of this is to be at the (i) the manual and semi-skilled level and (ii) educated and professional levels.

The participation of Muslims in regular employment is around 43.39 per cent, principally at the bottom level of income. In self-employment, in which their skills are acknowledged, their share is 38.89 per cent. Around 17.71 per cent of Muslims are employed in casual work.

There are a number of government schemes for minority education and training at different levels. These are inadequate given the size of the community and the requirements of the situation.

Here the role of community leaders and social workers becomes critical. The Muslim community should go beyond looking at questions of identity and dignity in a defensive mode and explore how both can be furthered in a changing India and a changing world. It should widen its ambit to hitherto unexplored or inadequately explored requirements of all segments of the community, particularly women, youth, and non-elite sections who together constitute the

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▶ **Voters whose names** were deleted during the Special Intensive Revision in West Bengal gather to appeal before a tribunal ahead of the Assembly election, in Murshidabad on April 13, 2026. PTI

overwhelming majority. This effort is to be made in the context of Indian conditions and the uniqueness of its three dimensions: plural, secular, and democratic.

ALONGSIDE, THERE ARE lessons to be learnt from the manner in which other minority communities, principally the Christians and the Sikhs, have successfully practised self-help to establish and maintain educational institutions at all levels. Their management practices can be emulated with benefit. The lesson in each case should underline the indispensability of socially useful education in modern India.

In reply to a question in Parliament on March 16, 2026, the Minister of Minority Affairs gave information on schemes under way in regard to education, skill development, and access to credit but said that details of funds allocated and utilised are not centrally maintained. On November 11, 2005, he said that “Public Order” and “Police” were subjects under the State List of the Constitution and that the National Commission for Minorities had advised State governments and Union Territories to conduct “Sarvdharm Samvad” (interfaith dialogue) meetings to curb incidents of attacks on minority communities and promote communal harmony and amity.

The efficacy of these steps has been assessed in the data compiled by “Hate Speech Events in India 2025”, published in Washington by the Center for the Study of Organized Hate, which showed a rise in the incidence of hate crimes in 2023 and 2024. Many of the incidents recorded explicitly called for social or economic boycott of minority communities. A majority of these calls were made on social media platforms.

While for the most part hate speech incidents occurred during regional or general elections, new trends of use of hate speech in local elections as a weapon for electoral gain were seen in 2025. In addition, at least one Chief Minister has frequently invoked conspiracies of “love jihad”, “land jihad”, and “spit jihad” alongside fearmongering about demographic change.

Such incidents make evident the lack of commitment to the stated principles of state policy.

IN MATTERS OF FAITH and/or distrust, the public is generally gullible and can be aggravated by slanted reporting by the press and social media. This seems to happen now in regard to intercommunity relations that in earlier times tended to rely on long-standing traditions of mutual help and good neighbourliness. Hence the felt need, with varying degrees of commitment, for Sarvdharm Samvad meetings.

The need of the hour, therefore, is to give shape to the Prime Minister’s dictum to “get connected and live together”. This is yet to be done.

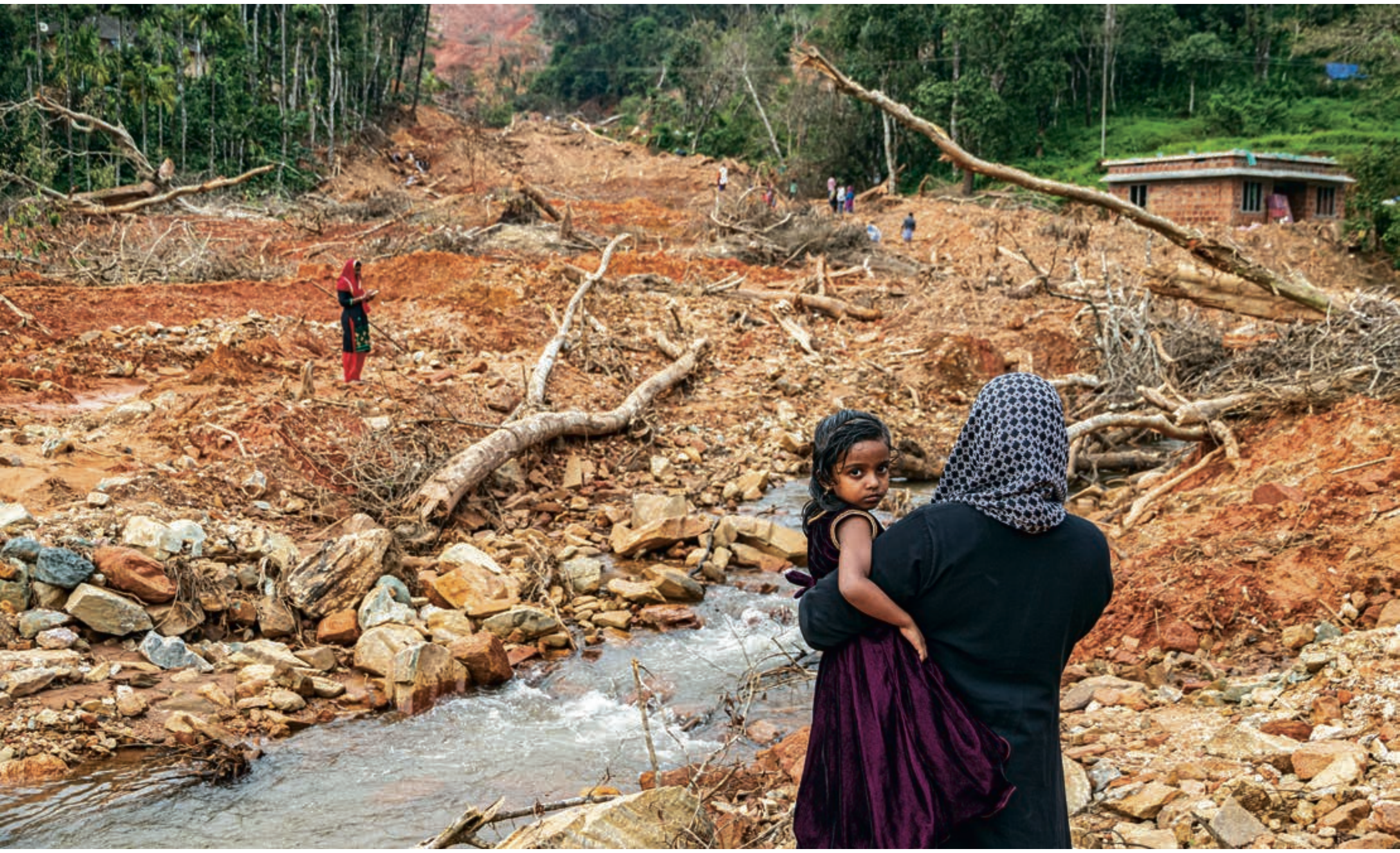
In the light of the above, what should be the approach of Indian Muslims to give shape to Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi’s objective to ensure Muslims “an honourable place in the Indian sun”?

Many decades earlier, the scholar Ghafoor Noorani had addressed the problem and opined that “to deny discrimination and pretend all is well is to fly in the face of facts. But agitation against discrimination can arouse the very emotions that foster discrimination. The solution of the Muslim problem lies in a resolution of this dilemma by devising a form and content of agitation which heals old wounds and inflicts no new ones. This resolution can be achieved by regarding discrimination as what it is; a problem of Indian democracy to be resolved within the framework of national integration.”

The Association for Protection of Civil Rights organised a meeting in June this year to highlight concerns over the demolition of mosques and on increasing threats to religious freedom. The principal speakers called for restraint and non-violent responses and not to react in ways that could further action against them. Others believed that the present situation was “a temporary phase rather than a lasting reality”.

So, while responsibility for improvement in educational levels and of related employable skills remains primarily with the Muslim community, to be undertaken within the framework of the law, the overall policy and attitudinal correctives lie with all segments of the administrative machinery of the state. They have not been forthcoming in adequate measure and thereby deny this segment of the population the benefits of equality and fraternity. ■

M. Hamid Ansari served as the 12th Vice President of India from 2007 to 2017 after a distinguished career in the Indian Foreign Service during which he was the country’s Ambassador to several countries.



▶ **Wayanad, Kerala, 2019–25.** In 2019 in Meppadi, Wayanad, I photographed a mother and child in a landscape ripped apart by floods. In 2025, in the same terrain, I documented rows of graves where unidentified victims of the tragedy lie buried (next page).

**Photo Essay**

# UNCERTAIN PAUSES

As climate change-related disasters become the new normal, these images capture communities whose lives are being broken over and over again and ask what resilience looks like when it is not heroic but helpless.

Text and photographs by **Siddharth Behl**

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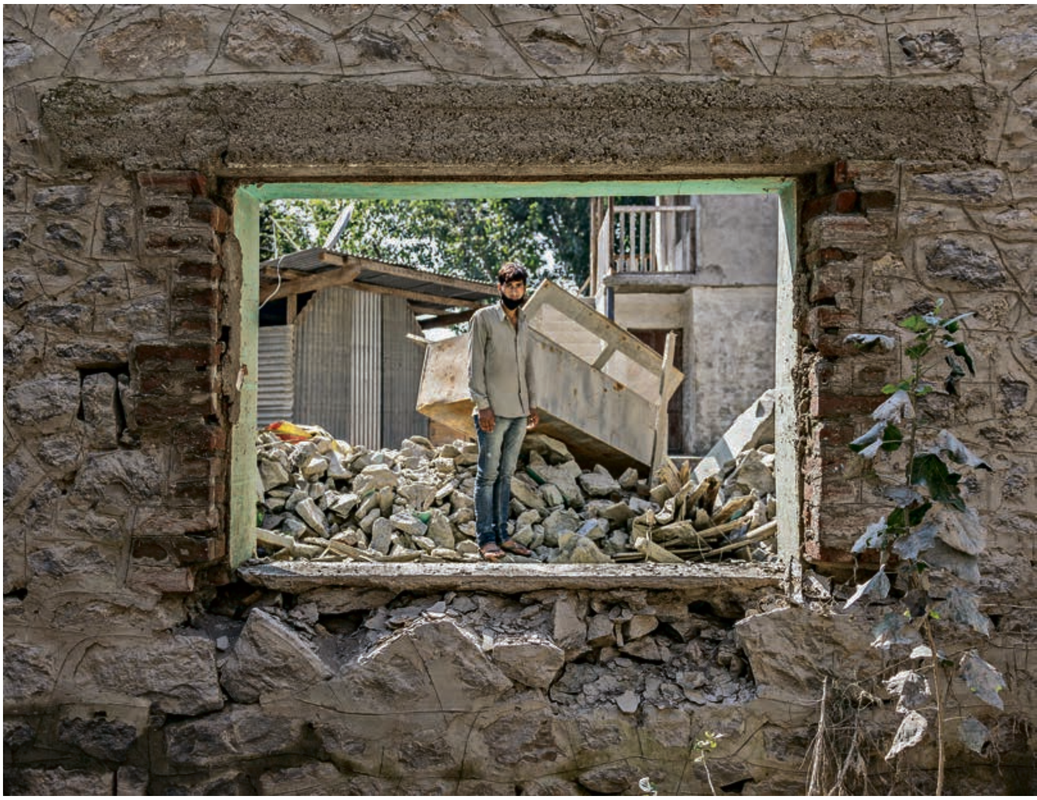
Over the past decade, I have been building a visual archive capturing the immediate aftermath of environmental disruptions across India and South Asia. It began in 2013 as a product of humanitarian fieldwork and then evolved into something more reflective: a sustained enquiry into what it means to live through recurring climate events. The archive now stands as a testament to both loss and survival, as the selection of images here proves.

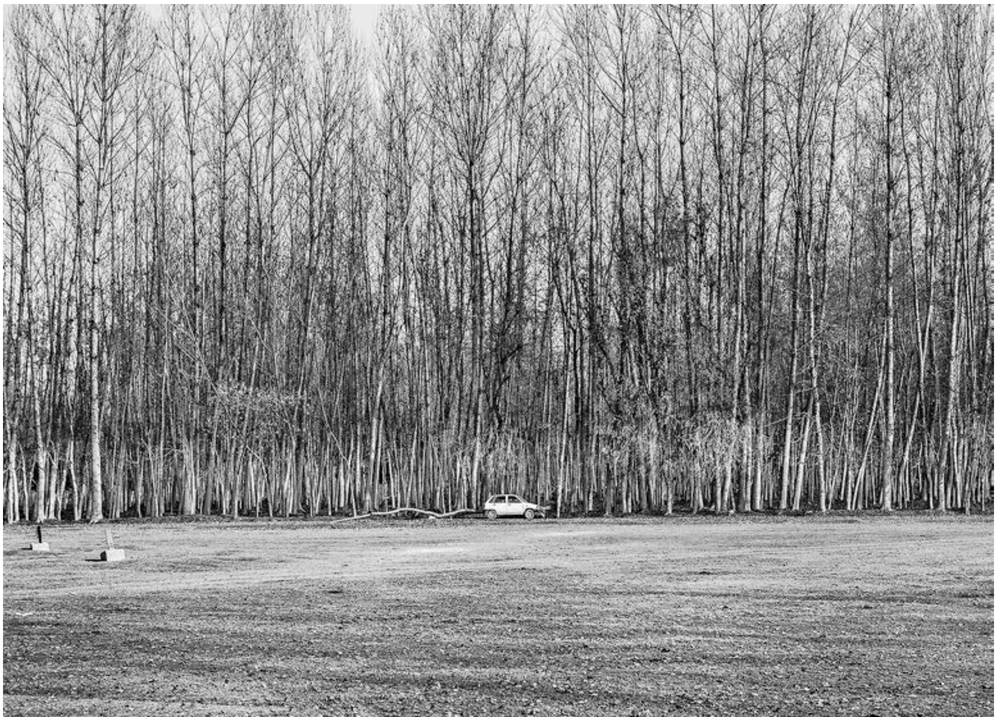
In recent decades, natural disasters have ceased to feel exceptional. Floods return before the previous year's silt has settled. Heat lingers far beyond its welcome. Rains arrive with unfamiliar force. What was once described as a "once in a century" event recurs within a single decade. In this repetition, something has subtly shifted, not only in the landscapes but also in the psyche of those inhabiting them. Communities now rebuild their lives not with continuation in mind but with the pragmatism of knowing that everything might be gone again, very soon. In such a scenario, architecture becomes provisional, memory shortens, and disaster preparedness becomes instinctive.

The images were often made within hours or days of impact, with the waterlines still visible on trees, the soil still unstable underfoot, and livelihoods in disarray. As

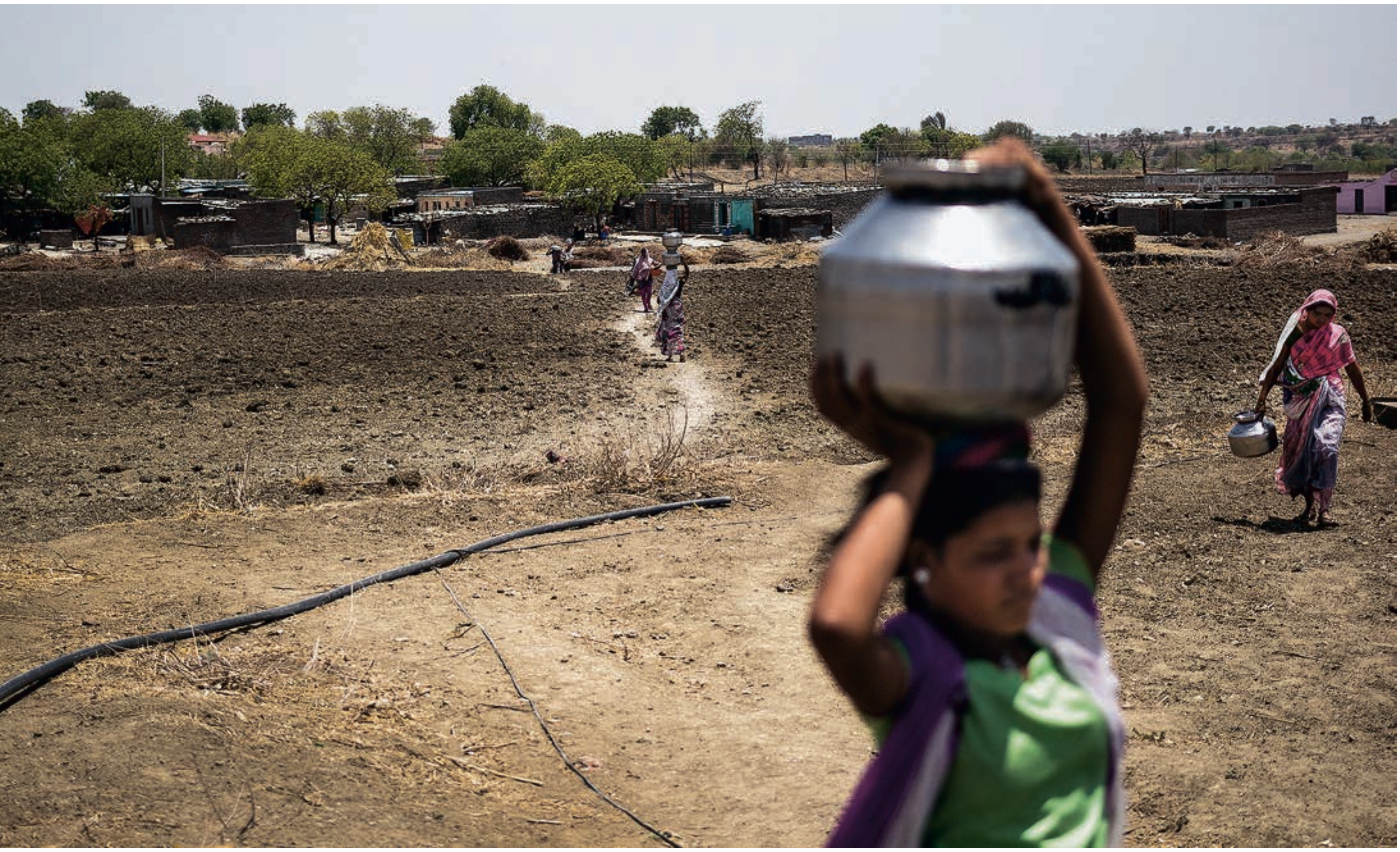
**Floods return before the previous year's silt has settled. Heat lingers far beyond its welcome. Rains arrive with unfamiliar force. In this repetition, something has subtly shifted.**



**Pulwama, Kashmir, 2014.** A man stands amid the rubble left behind by the flash floods that occurred in the area in 2014.



**Anantnag, Kashmir, 2014.** Captured in the aftermath of the 2014 floods, the image shows the faint horizontal line across the trunks that marks the height at which the floodwaters once stood.

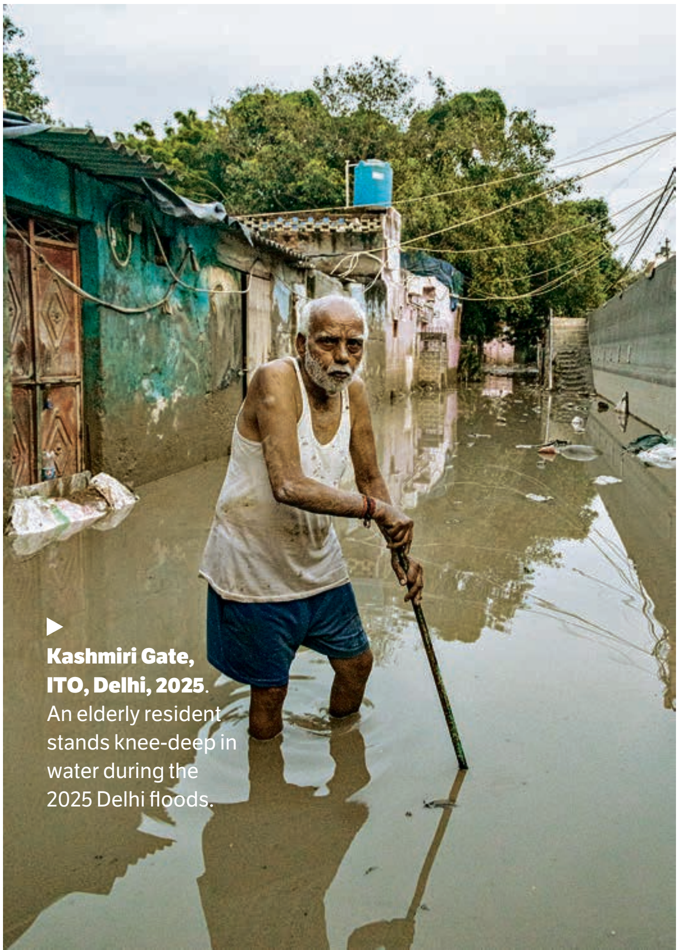


**Takarwan village, Beed, Maharashtra, 2016.** In a daily ritual of labour and endurance, women of the drought-stricken Beed district carry water in a landscape stripped of moisture and mercy.

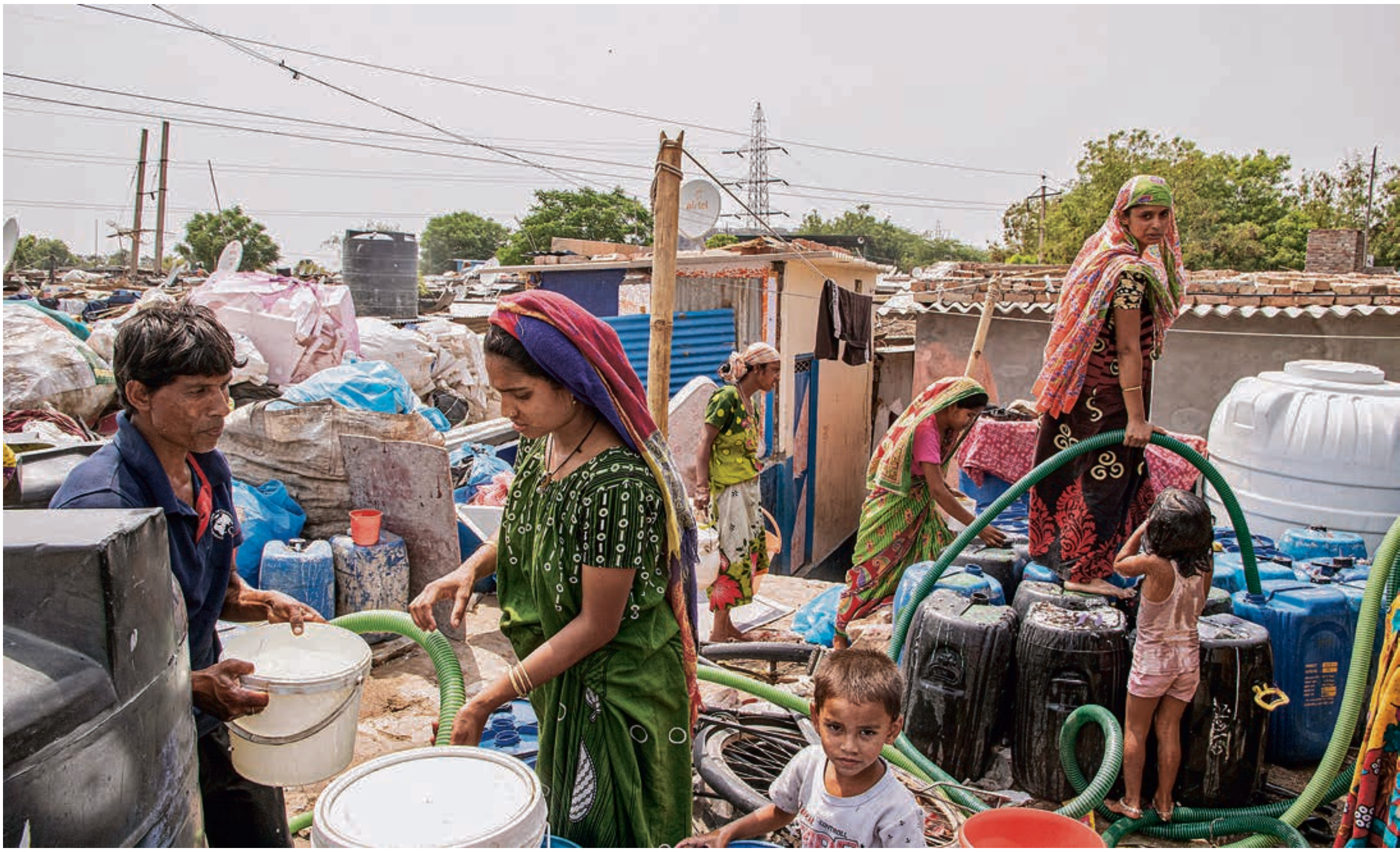
such, they are suspended in the shifting space between loss and adaptation. Taken across river basins, coastal belts, agrarian settlements, and temporary shelters, the photographs observe families in altered terrains as they tend to what remains: livestock, children, threatened health, fragments of home. Groups gather in an uncertain pause, children watch without fully understanding, elders stare not with shock or surprise but with recognition.

**THE CLIMATE DISCOURSE** is often expressed through graphs, projections, or images of aerial devastation. In contrast, this series insists on proximity. It looks at faces, hands, texture of the earth after saturation, displaced livestock. The human body becomes the unit of measurement, both of loss and adaptation.

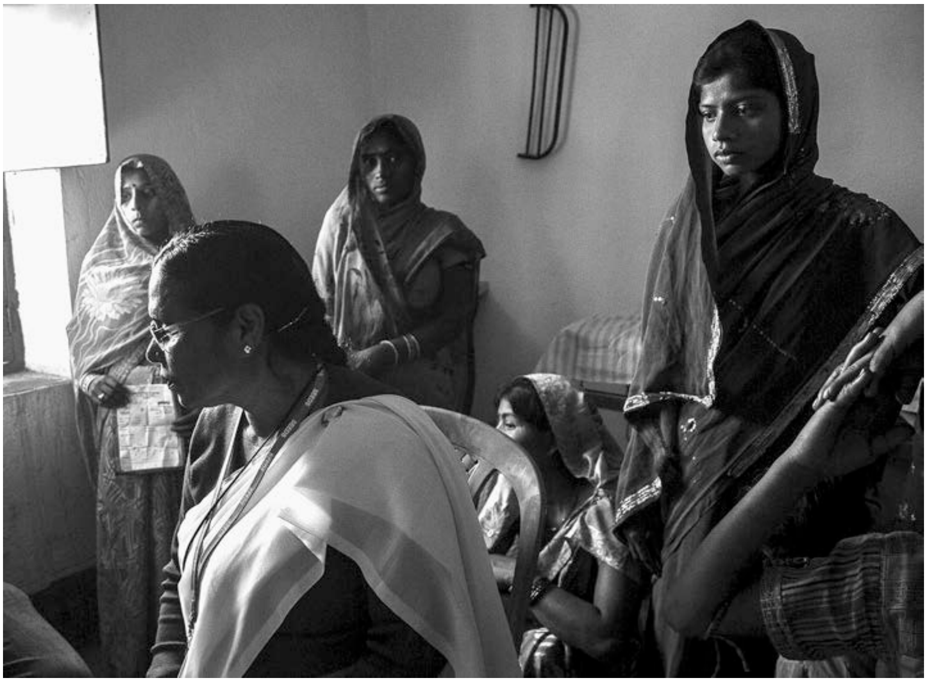
Over time, the archive has revealed patterns



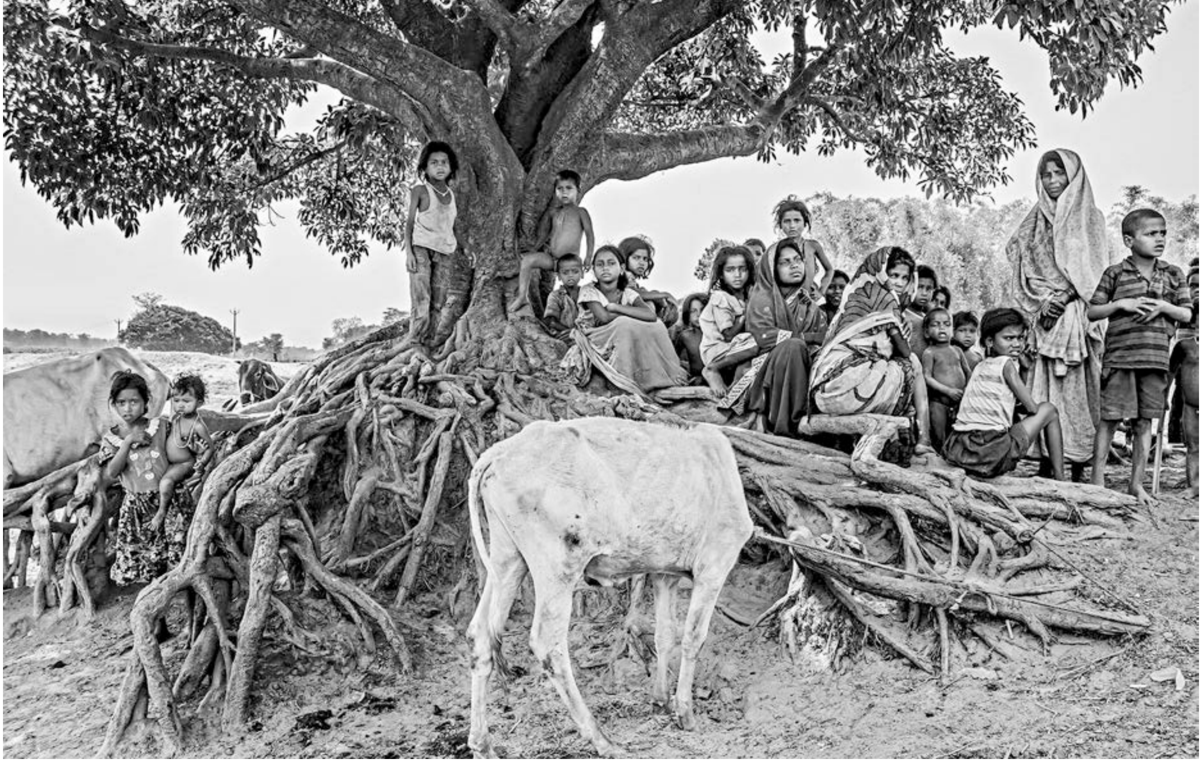
**Kashmiri Gate, ITO, Delhi, 2025**. An elderly resident stands knee-deep in water during the 2025 Delhi floods.



▼ **Masoodpur slums, Vasant Kunj, Delhi, 2018.** In 2018, an unforgiving heatwave swept through Delhi, as has happened in subsequent years. For migrant families living in tin-roofed shelters that trapped the sun's fury, survival depended on a few buckets of shared water and the mercy of intermittent supply. The heat drained out bodies and turned daily wage work into a constant risk.



▶ **Saharsa village, Bihar, 2013.** At a modest health centre, a nurse checks patients, who still bear the scars of the 2008 Kosi floods. Contaminated water continues to seep into potable water sources, causing chronic illnesses and affecting the health of pregnant women.

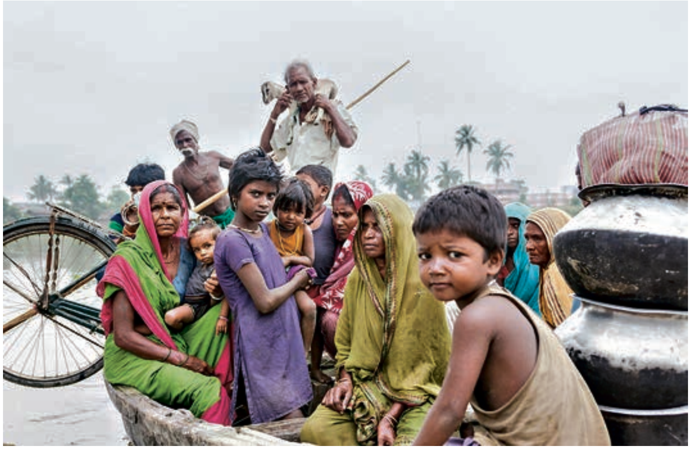


▶ **Madhepura village, Bihar, 2014.** The exposed roots of a tree cling to the eroded earth in Madhepura, which has been repeatedly reshaped by the flooding Kosi.

beyond immediate crises: of environmental disruption intersecting with the existing fault lines of poverty, caste, land rights, or of fragile infrastructure. The vulnerable absorb the first and the worst impact. But they are also the architects of adaptation. They innovate quietly, salvaging materials, sharing shelter, adjusting migration routes, and reorganising domestic spaces around new risks. Families from villages, urban, and peri-urban areas often occupy the same frame here, suggesting that the burden of climate disasters is rarely borne alone. The archive asks, what does resilience look like when it is not heroic but habitual?

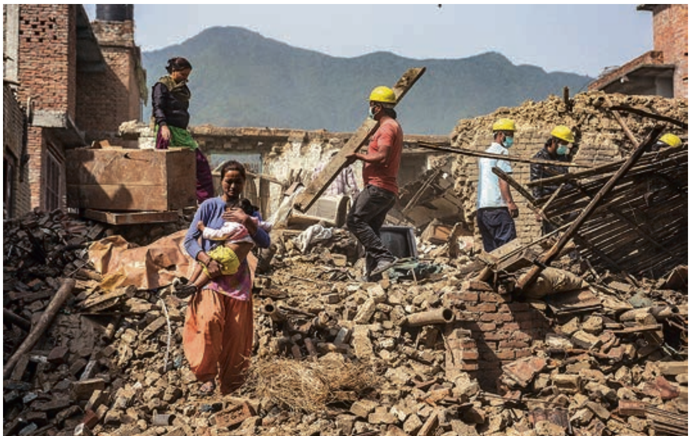
It also raises vital questions about ways of seeing: how does a photographer maintain ethical clarity in the face of disaster? How to make sameness resonate with the audience? How to photograph adaptation without suggesting acceptance? I will consider the project successful if these images make you see climate change not as spectacle but as an everyday occurrence, re-evaluated in human terms. ■

Siddharth Behl is a documentary photojournalist and a National Geographic explorer based out of New Delhi. His works are chiefly social documentaries focussed on climate change, migration, refugees, and historical research.



▶ **Kosi bank, Bihar, 2017.** As the Kosi swells up, villagers are evacuated in boats. In 2008, embankment breaches displaced millions, exposing the fragility of life along this volatile river.

▶ **Bhaktapur, Nepal, 2015.** In the aftermath of an earthquake, a mother carries her child through the rubble of what was once home, even as rescue workers sift through the debris.



[ THE ETHICAL LIFE ]

**RAJEEV BHARGAVA**, a political theorist, is honorary professor at CSDS, Delhi, and director of the centre's Parekh Institute of Indian Thought.

# Shameless and powerful

Having captured every institution that might hold him to account, the shameless strongman offends in full view of the public because being seen and going unpunished is itself the demonstration of impunity.

An incident that took place in 2023 in the Lok Sabha, the principal constitutional body of Indians, stunned many of us. A BJP MP, Ramesh Bidhuri, subjected a fellow MP from the Bahujan Samaj Party, Danish Ali, to a virulent anti-Muslim tirade. Bigoted slurs had not been uncommon before this, but they were uttered in private, behind the back of Muslims. An abuser caught demeaning a person's community usually felt shame. But not Bidhuri, who abused deliberately, openly, with aplomb. This shamelessness was unprecedented.

Shame is a complex, relational, and ethically charged emotion. Complex, because unlike a raw feeling–like being startled by a loud bang–shame is culturally acquired, prompted by a desire to conceal rather than to express. Relational, because it always involves significant others: anyone who, in the given context, is important enough to have to hide oneself from. (Parliament, Muslims, the public at large.) And ethical, because shame exposes the person as being in the wrong. The experience of shame is infused with ideas of right and wrong.

Nakedness immediately comes to mind. The Greek word for shame, *aidõs*, is directly connected to *aidoia*, a standard term for genitals. One does not want to be caught naked, and if seen, one instantly looks for cover. Conversely, wanting to be seen naked is widely taken as a sign of utter shamelessness. To throw away all inhibition and show oneself in the wrong condition or state is to be without shame.

This reasoning opens up several routes to shamelessness. The first is to make others insignificant, in thought or action, so that one can lie to people because one believes they are not worthy of knowing the truth. The second is to cease viewing others as people at all, treating them not as subjects with a point of view but as mere objects, incapable of thought or action–as *kachra*, part of a pile of garbage. The third is to become amoral, one who no longer cares about right and wrong and actively destroys the distinction between the two. The fourth is to rid oneself of emotion altogether and become heartless. Completely heartless people are constitutively shameless.

We are probably witnessing, before our very eyes, the (partly deliberate) collective reproduction of the conditions for heartlessness, immorality, dehumanisation, and objectification–conditions under which those who hold enough power become entirely shameless. Shamelessness in Indian public life is a calculated, strategic operation upon the very foundations of institutional, public, and political ethic. The operation begins with fortification around the actor, a wall so solid that nothing penetrates it: no rational argument, no judicial stricture, no moral demand. Criticism is defanged before being heard; the critic is not answered but delegitimised, labelled an anti-national, an anti-Hindu, an urban naxal, pro-Pakistan. "I don't give a damn!" is not an outburst; it is a political technology–a policy executed through the instruments of the state itself–where a stray tweet is followed by an FIR, a speech is fol-

▶

lowed by a sedition case that will take a decade before it fails in court, by which time the point has already been made. What such episodes display is the rhinoceros skin of the dehumaniser: unresponsive, unaccountable and where invulnerability is worn as a badge of public pride. Caught in the wrong, the shameless actor–the strongman–refuses to resign, explain, or even acknowledge the disapproving gaze. This refusal to acknowledge *is* the message, transmitted in prime time to millions of viewers.

**THE BRAZEN, SHAMELESS** act is not done covertly in the dark but is staged in broad daylight–filmed, in fact, on officials' phones and released as content–because being seen and going unpunished is itself the demonstration of impunity, and that display is the instrument of domination. Ordinary offenders hide their offence, and in hiding pay a backhanded tribute to the law, conceding that the law still commands authority that they must dodge. The shameless actor, in contrast, offends in full view of the public. He does not evade the tribunal–of law, of conscience, of the electorate's better judgment. He abolishes it or replaces it with a captured tribunal that will pronounce the verdict he wants. The shameless strongman is not radicalising accountability, pushing it to some fierce extreme. He is hollowing out the word while keeping intact its institutional shell: the court still sits, the commission still convenes, the authorities still issue notices, but all of them now answer to the strongman, rather than to constitutional morality.

This is exactly where the contrast with a very different nakedness is illuminating. The Digambara ascetic of the Jaina tradition refuses clothing itself: sky-clad, he stands naked before the world, flouting the most basic social convention of covering, owning nothing that the state or the crowd could seize as leverage. To untrained eyes this is akin to shamelessness. But the nakedness of the ascetic is the inverse of the strongman's. He strips not to escape every tribunal but to submit to a higher one. His indifference to the social gaze is obedience to a higher truth the social gaze cannot see. He cannot be blackmailed because he wants nothing the world can give or withhold–his is a shamelessness of renunciation, enacted with the "body as a form of truth-telling", as Michel Foucault brilliantly put it in his lectures on the Greek Cynics.

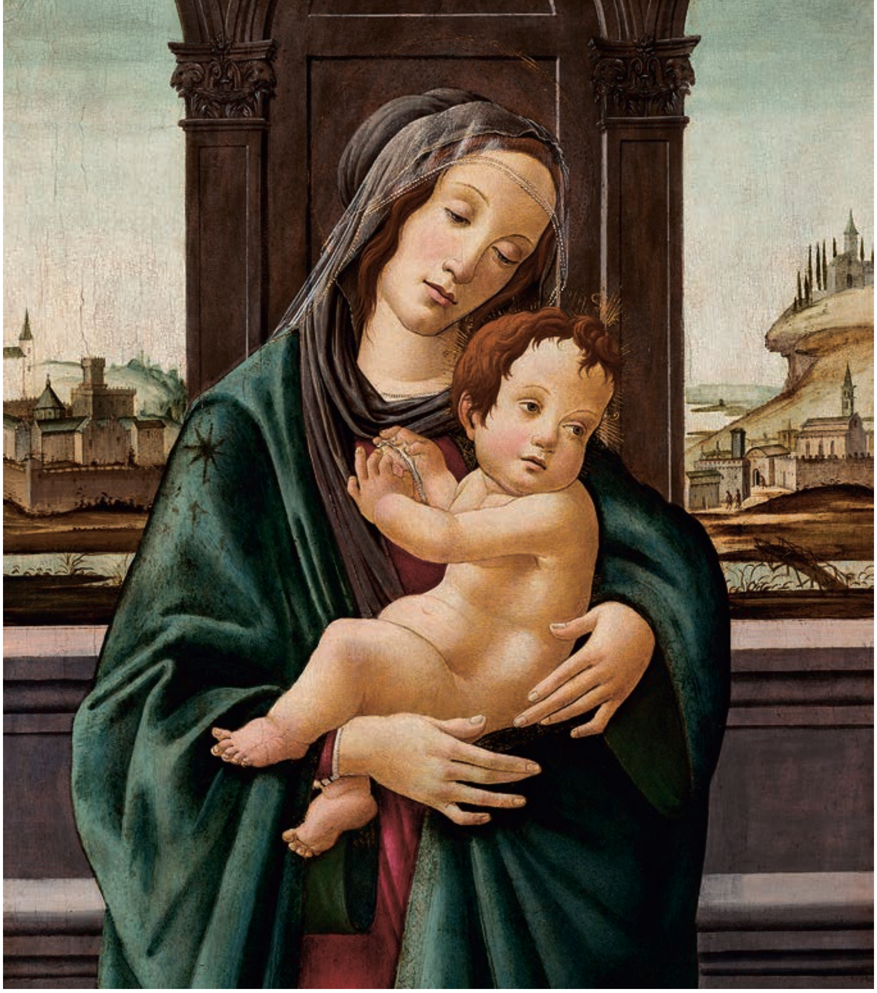
**Shamelessness in Indian public life is a calculated, strategic operation upon the very foundations of institutional, public, and political ethic.**

▶ **The father of Ria,** a 23-year-old NEET aspirant who died by suicide, speaking during a Cockroach Janta Party rally at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, on July 5. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Shameless strongmen, too, step outside the ordinary economy of shame, but they renounce nothing and grab everything. Where ascetics cannot be blackmailed because of their surrender of everything the world might hold against them, strongmen become unaccountable because of their capture of every institution that might hold them to account: the investigating agency, the prime-time anchor, the pliant judge, the WhatsApp group that will manufacture tomorrow's outrage on command. The naked monk makes himself answerable to the highest court by dispensing with all the lower ones; the strongman abolishes the highest court by suborning all the lower ones. One nakedness disarms and liberates; the other weaponises and dominates. The ascetic's refusal humbles power. The strongman's refusal consecrates it.

Shamelessness has been growing exponentially in public and political life since 2014 and has been normalised by escalation. Do something wrong; let the shock settle (shoving pork in the mouth of a Muslim). Follow that with a second escalation, on a slightly higher scale, which makes the earlier one seem modest by comparison (the rallying cry, *"Goli maro salon ko"* [shoot the traitors of the nation], or men in power garlanding murderers and rapists). Then set off a third one, higher still (the official bulldozing of private houses of public protesters), until the people, exhausted, feel something like relief whenever the upward movement pauses momentarily. Each act licenses the next; each act of silence from those positioned to object is read, correctly, as permission. Public cruelty is normalised not by argument but by an ominous cadence.

We seem already on the edge of a civilisational precipice, but shamelessness shows no sign of abating. The leak of NEET examination papers has wrecked the lives of millions. Young aspirants have died by suicide. The hunger strikers at Jantar Mantar demanding the resignation of the Education Minister have put their lives in danger, but he is unchastened. Will the naked loot at the *"bhavya"* mandir, the newly minted temple in Ayodhya, eventually shame those in power? Or will it be covered up, again, by even more spectacular acts of shamelessness? ■



▶ ***Madonna and Child*** by Sandro Botticelli, c. 1490 CE. MUSEO STIBBERT, FLORENCE

Art

# HEART OF THE MATER

"One Mother, Many Mother Tongues", an exhibition co-curated by Naman Ahuja and Andrea Anastasio, celebrates the cult of the mother goddess down the ages, around the world. **MADHULIKA LIDDLE**

In 2008, a group of archaeologists exploring the Hohle Fels cave in Germany's Swabia region found a small figurine that would come to be known as the Venus of Hohle Fels. Just 6 centimetres high and carved from mammoth ivory, the figurine is to this day the oldest piece of art that unarguably depicts a human figure. Wide-hipped, fat-armed, and large-bosomed, the Venus bears all the hallmarks of a mother goddess and could be anywhere between 40,000 and 42,000 years old.

The human reverence for mothers, to the extent of worshipping the symbols of mother-

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hood, is both a very old and widespread concept. Feminine deities that symbolise fertility, birth, nurturing, the cycle of growth—and even, in a metaphorical sense, creativity—have been worshipped since prehistoric times in places as far apart as Mexico and India, Rome and China. It is not difficult to see why just about every culture across the world would have, independently, come up with the idea of a "mother goddess": the miracle of pregnancy and birth has long been regarded as a universal mystery. The ability to bring forth new life was the ultimate power. Furthermore, it was perhaps logical for an early agricultural society to draw an analogy between the fertility of women and the all-important fertility of the land itself.

This veneration of the mother goddess has taken myriad forms across many millennia. She has been depicted countless times and in countless ways. She has been celebrated in verse and song: the Hurrian Hymn, the oldest known song in the world, is a 3,400-year-old hymn dedicated to an ancient Syrian goddess of fertility known as Nikkal. Great friezes of her have been carved; tiny amulets (like the Venus of Hohle Fels) of her have been created. She has evolved, diversifying in her depiction from a standard feminine form to an animal-headed one, or from a playful, affectionate mother to a sombre matriarch. From the many and varied mother goddesses across the world, she has been narrowed down to the relatively few female deities of the world's major religions.

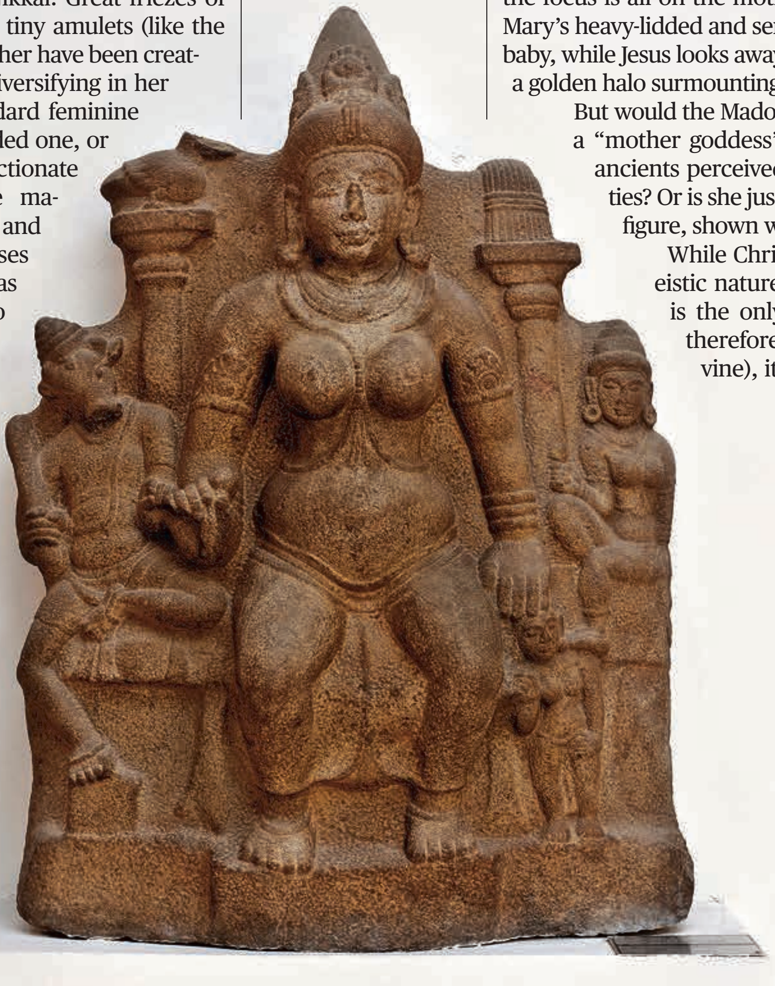
**Feminine deities that symbolise fertility, birth, nurturing, and the cycle of growth have been worshipped since prehistoric times in places as far apart as Mexico and India, Rome and China.**

A recently opened exhibition titled "One Mother, Many Mother Tongues" at Humayun's Tomb Museum, New Delhi, until August 8 examines the mother goddess in her many forms. Co-curated by Professor Naman Ahuja of JNU and Andrea Anastasio, Director of the Italian Embassy Cultural Centre of Delhi, the exhibition is a collaboration between the governments of India and Italy, bringing together as it does a collection—though modest—of relevant artworks from museums and private collections across the two countries.

LITERALLY AT THE heart of the exhibition, almost in the centre of the space it occupies, is its most famous artwork: Sandro Botticelli's *Madonna and Child* (1490 CE). Of the 24 exhibits that are spread across the gallery, this is the only painting; the others are sculptures. Mary and the Christ Child occupy the centre of the space, flanked by distant views of buildings and a hill, a river running by. The backdrop is relatively sketchy; the focus is all on the mother and her child. Mary's heavy-lidded and serene gaze is on her baby, while Jesus looks away, out of the frame, a golden halo surmounting his brown curls.

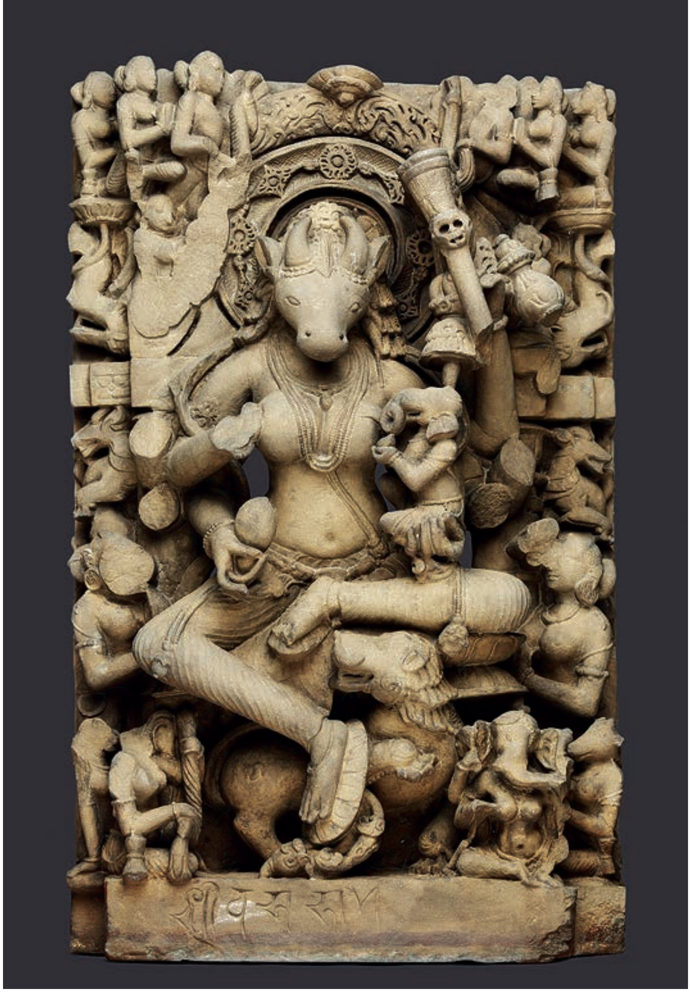
But would the Madonna be considered a "mother goddess" in the sense the ancients perceived their female deities? Or is she just another maternal figure, shown with her child?

While Christianity's monotheistic nature holds that Christ is the only God (and Mary, therefore, is not truly divine), it seems that moth-



▶ **Jyehā,** granite, Pallava, 8th to 9th century CE, from Tamil Nadu.

NATIONAL MUSEUM, DELHI



▶ **Vrishabha Yogini,** sandstone (with a small inscription in Siddhamatrika script), Chandela/Kalachuri, 10th–11th century, from Satna, eastern Madhya Pradesh. INDIAN MUSEUM, KOLKATA (6494/A25218)

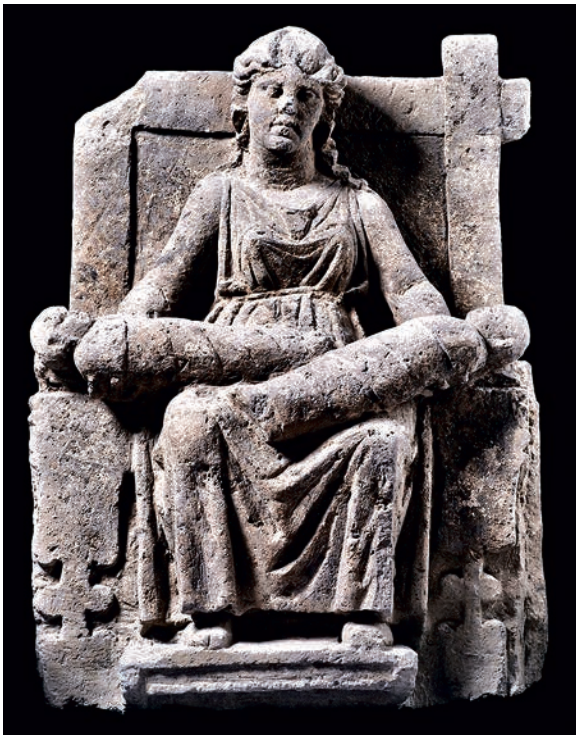
er-worshipping habits are hard to break. With the coming of Christianity, formerly pagan populations across Europe that had once worshipped Demeter, Ceres, and Nerthus moved their allegiance to Mary. Early on in the history of the religion, by the 6th century, people in plague-afflicted Europe were praying to Mary for deliverance. Through the Black Death, and even into the present day—closer home, for instance in Velankanni, where Mary is worshipped as Our Lady of Good Health—this is a mother whose protective power extends beyond her own child to all her worshippers.

This idea of the protective divine mother is cross-cultural. In Hinduism itself, there are other goddesses who protect and heal: Mariamman, Sitala, and Jyeshtha, among other deities who both bestow offspring and then protect those offspring from virulent diseases. One of these, Jyeshtha, appears in this exhibition too. She is depicted in a fine granite sculpture from Tamil Nadu, dating back to between the 8th and 9th centuries CE. It is a striking carving, Jyeshtha's face benign, her left hand resting on the head of a child whose expression is deeply peaceful. On Jyeshtha's right is a very different figure, and yet one that is often seen in images of mother goddesses in the Indian subcontinent: a human body with the head of a cow.

FIGURES SUCH AS these, combining the attributes of humans and animals (especially bovines and ungulates), symbolise a deity who mediates between different realms. There are several of them in this exhibition. A pre-Kushan sandstone sculpture, around 2,000 years old, for example, is endowed with the head of a goat, though the rest of her body, as well as the baby she holds, are obviously human. Almost 10 centuries younger than her is an intricately carved Vrishabha Yogini, cow-headed and surrounded by figures, both human and animal.

And then there is one mother goddess who upturns all notions of the benevolent, kind mother: Chamunda, a sculpture from 11th-12th century Bengal. Sleek, slim-waisted, festooned with a garland of decapitated heads, Chamunda is a far cry from Botticelli's serene-faced Madonna or the beautifully posed Skandama-

▶ **Mater Matuta,** tuff with a coated and painted surface, c. 3rd century BCE. MUSEO PROVINCIALE CAMPANO, CAPUA



ta of Taneshwar Mahadev in Udaipur. The latter, even though its details have been eroded and obliterated by time, evokes the bond between mother and child in a way that leaves one in no doubt of the tender relationship between the two figures.

The diversity in the depiction of mother goddesses in this exhibition is one of its most emphatic features. There are playful mothers here, and tranquil ones. There are avenging mothers, and mothers whose protective power focusses not just on one beloved child but on several creatures. There are seated mothers, ranging from the Kushan-era Hariti, to small Etruscan female figures, to the solemn, nearly life-size Mater Matutas from the 3rd and 4th centuries BCE in Rome.

It is through iconography like this—similar in pose and mien but originating from diverse geographical spaces—that the exhibition's title justifies itself. The one mother, but loved and venerated in different ways, in different interpretations: "One Mother, Many Mother Tongues". A title, interestingly enough, that connects the mother with speech. The Sanskrit *matrika* and the Latin *mater/matrix* are both derived from a shared Proto-Indo-European root word, and both refer not just to a mother in the biological sense but also in connection with speech and measurement: vowels, metrics. It is a thought-provoking insight, an examination of concepts ranging from etymology to motherhood to language and speech.

A**S ONE MAKES** one's way through this compact exhibition, it is hard not to marvel at the way ideas spread. At how the sombre-faced Mater Matutas of Rome mirror the Haritis from halfway across the world, or how Botticelli's Madonna may have had her origins in a mother goddess similar to the ones the Etruscans worshipped.

The exhibition, not just a fine exposition of mother iconography but also immensely informative, still raises questions, which it encourages viewers to ponder. "Does society cast parenthood as only a feminine role? Do we have enough examples that celebrate the baby girl? What forces in society promoted depictions of little boys with their mother-goddesses?" To this may be added another: why did primarily patriarchal societies, with male-dominated pantheons, worship mother goddesses?

The scholar Johanna H. Stuckey's theory is that originally goddesses across the world were depicted invariably as powerful, even aggressive, deities. With the rise of patriarchal societies, they were, so to speak, defanged by turning them into gentler "mothers": still at times powerful but with that power rooted in protectiveness.

It is a question worth pondering over, along with the other questions the exhibition raises, even as one wanders past image after image of mothers in various forms, including the wrathful Chamunda, the playful Indrani, the loving Madonna, or the human-animal morphs. Mothers all, so different, but in essence the same. ■

Madhulika Liddle is a novelist and short story writer.

*"One Mother, Many Mother Tongues" is on display on the first floor at Humayun's Tomb Museum, New Delhi, until August 8, 2026.*

▶ **Hariti,** limestone, 4th century CE, from Takkellapadu, Telangana. TELANGANA STATE ARCHAEOLOGY MUSEUM, HYDERABAD (FORMERLY IN THE GUNTUR SITE MUSEUM).

THE HINDU ARCHIVES

Culture

# THE THINKING MUSICIAN

As Pandit Satyasheel Deshpande turns 75 this year, his greatest gift to students is not a raga or bandish but a way of listening. And, through that, a way of living. **PUSHKAR LELE**

Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India
Music Club, IIT Madras
L&T Constr on

The first thing Pandit Satyasheel Deshpande taught me had nothing to do with music.

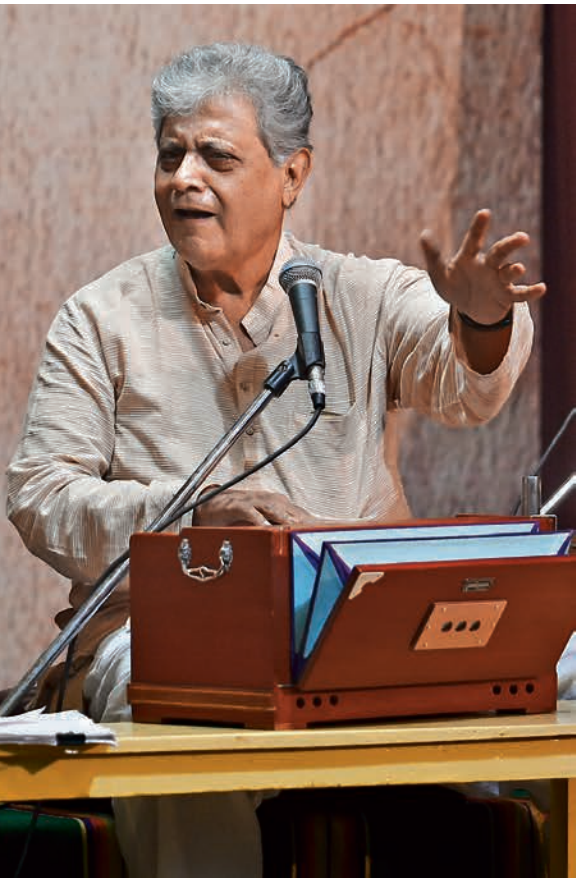
It happened more than two decades ago at the Gharana Festival organised by the Department of Music at Shivaji University, Kolhapur. I was a young disciple accompanying my guru, Pandit Vijay Sardeshmukh—one of Pandit Kumar Gandharva's most dedicated disciples—to what was then among the country's most exciting gatherings of Hindustani musicians. For days, concerts followed one another almost without pause. From dawn until well past midnight, stalwarts representing the Gwalior, Agra, Kirana, Jaipur-Atrauli, Patiala, and other *khayal* traditions transformed the university campus into a living celebration of Hindustani *khayal* music.

After one such marathon day, Satyasheelji bundled a few of us into his car and announced that he was taking us to taste Kolhapur's famous anda bhurji (scrambled eggs). We, young and somewhat inhibited, were far less enthusiastic than he expected. He looked genuinely disappointed. Then, quite suddenly, he broke into a bandish. Right there, in the moving car, the culinary excursion gave way to an impromptu lecture on melody, poetic imagery, and the hidden architecture of a composition. The bandish became a springboard for discussing how a musician enters the world of a raga: not by applying a ready-made formula but by discovering the possibilities embedded within that particular composition.

The anda bhurji has long faded from memory. The conversation has not.

Looking back, I realise that this incident contained, in miniature, everything that makes Satyasheelji who he is. Music, for him, is not an activity reserved for the concert plat-

**Music, for Pandit Satyasheel Deshpande, is not an activity reserved for the concert platform alone. It spills effortlessly into conversation, literature, food, theatre, language, and everyday life.**



▼ **Pandit Satyasheel Deshpande** performs at "Singing with Gandharva", a tribute to his guru, in Chennai on October 21, 2017. S. R. RAGHUNATHAN

form alone. It spills effortlessly into conversation, literature, food, theatre, language, and everyday life. Ideas excite him. Questions energise him. An offhand remark can trigger a spirited discussion on aesthetics, often punctuated with spontaneous singing. He argues passionately, listens attentively, and delights in disagreement. One rarely leaves his company without having one's own assumptions gently—or sometimes vigorously—challenged.

THAT INTELLECTUAL RESTLESSNESS, more than any stylistic hallmark, defines his place in contemporary Hindustani music.

Born in Mumbai in 1951, Satyasheelji inherited not merely a musical lineage but an extraordinary culture of enquiry. His father, Vamanrao Deshpande, was among the most influential musicologists and critics of modern India. His writings transformed the way Hindustani music came to be discussed, analysed, and understood. Yet Vamanrao's greatest legacy may have been less tangible than his books. He created a home where music was never reduced to inherited dogma.

The Deshpande household was a remarkable meeting place for musicians, scholars, writers, and thinkers. Kumar Gandharva, Gangubai Hangal, Bhimsen Joshi, Mogubai Kurdikar, Jagannathbuwa Purohit, Professor B.R. Deodhar, and many others were frequent visitors. Music was performed there, certainly, but it was also debated, questioned, reimagined. Aesthetic disagreements were welcomed rather than feared. Different gharanas were admired for their distinctive insights rather than ranked in any hierarchy.

For a young mind growing up amidst such conversations, music naturally became an intellectual adventure rather than merely a hereditary inheritance. This atmosphere perhaps explains why Satyasheelji never became a sectarian musician. His deep and transformative association with Kumar Gandharva is central to his artistic life. And yet, to describe him simply as Kumarji's disciple would be profoundly inadequate. Kumar Gandharva shaped not only his music but his way of thinking.

One recollection from Satyasheelji's years in Dewas has stayed with me since I first heard him narrate it. Kumarji rarely conducted lessons in the conventional sense. He hummed while tending to his garden, while travelling in a tonga, while sitting at the dining table. His disciples learnt as much by observing him live with music as by formally learning compositions. Music was never switched on for rehearsals and switched off afterwards. It remained an ongoing process of contemplation.

That insight may well be Kumar Gandharva's greatest gift to Satyasheel Deshpande. The distinction between music as something one performs and music as something one inhabits explains a lot about Satyasheelji's own journey.

The history of Hindustani music is rich with brilliant disciples who became exemplary custodians of their guru's style. Far rarer are those who remain deeply loyal to their guru's artistic

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vision while refusing to become mere replicas. Satyasheelji belongs firmly to this second category.

His early recordings naturally reveal the unmistakable influence of Kumar Gandharva. Anything else would have been surprising. Yet imitation was never his destination. Over the decades, his music quietly absorbed insights from the Jaipur, Agra, Kirana, Gwalior, Bhendi Bazaar, and Indore traditions. These influences were not used only as decorative ornaments; rather, each one was examined, questioned, and reinterpreted according to Satyasheelji's own artistic temperament. He continues to remind students that one learns best not by collecting musical phrases but by understanding the ideas that produce them.

A FINE EXAMPLE of his intellectual generosity is the Samvaad Foundation, established about five decades ago. Long before documentation and archiving became institutional priorities, Satyasheelji realised that invaluable musical knowledge was disappearing with every passing generation. Through Samvaad, he recorded interviews, performances, and conversations with numerous musicians and scholars—many celebrated, many forgotten but all carrying unique aesthetic insights.

The very choice of the name *Samvaad* (dialogue) is revealing; dialogue requires a willingness to listen before speaking. Throughout his career, Satyasheelji has embodied precisely this spirit, his scholarship never driven by the desire to establish definitive conclusions but to continually ask new questions. That quality is becoming increasingly rare.

Many musician-scholars possess formidable learning, but their scholarship often serves to reinforce pre-existing convictions. Satyasheelji's scholarship works in the opposite direction. The more he studies, the more curious he becomes. Every answer seems to generate another question. Every musical certainty invites re-examination.

Conversations with him can move effortlessly from an obscure *khayal* composition to Shakespeare, from Urdu poetry to Marathi literature, from linguistics to cinema, from the aesthetics of Amir Khan to a forgotten phrase sung by Abdul Wahid Khan—all without ever sounding like displays of erudition. His astonishing memory and ability to connect disparate ideas arise not from a desire to impress but from an instinctive delight in discovering relationships across disciplines.

To listen to Satyasheel Deshpande is to encounter a musician who places extraordinary faith in the bandish itself. In many contemporary performances, the composition functions merely as an entry point before yielding to expansive improvisation. For Satyasheelji, however, the bandish remains the central creative force. Its melodic design, rhythmic structure, poetic imagery, and emotional suggestion together determine the direction of improvisation. Instead of imposing predetermined patterns upon every composition, he allows each bandish to reveal its own logic.

This deceptively simple principle demands immense discipline. It asks the musician to listen before attempting to create. It privileges understanding over virtuosity.

As a composer, too, he extends this philosophy. His own bandish are neither nostalgic imitations of older forms nor restless attempts at novelty. They emerge from decades of engagement with the tradition, yet remain unmistakably personal. One senses in them a mind continually testing ideas rather than seeking final answers.

Yet, if I were asked where Satyasheelji's most enduring contribution lies, I would choose his teaching.

In our musical culture, the guru occupies an exalted place. That tradition has undoubtedly nurtured extraordinary musicians. But it has also, at times, normalised unquestioning obedience, fear, and emotional intimidation as legitimate pedagogical methods. Satyasheelji offers another possibility.

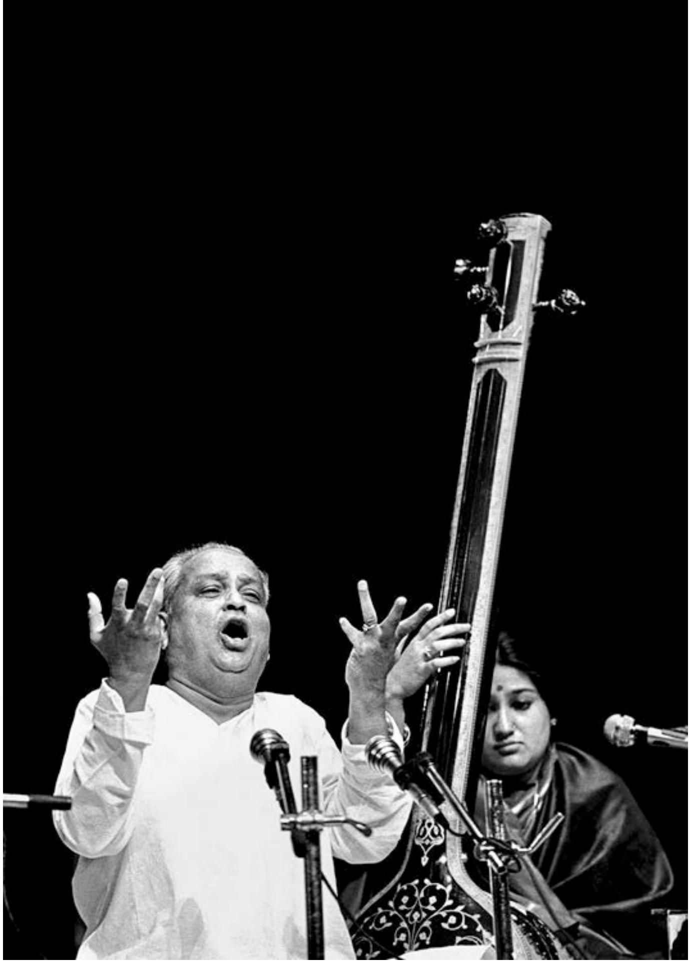
Over the years I have spent learning from him, I have rarely encountered him in a state of cynicism or despair. There is an infectious openness about him, a willingness to engage

**Throughout his career, Satyasheelji has embodied the spirit of *samvaad* (dialogue), his scholarship never driven by the desire to establish definitive conclusions but to continually ask new questions.**

every sincere question without condescension. More importantly, he possesses a remarkable ability to identify what is alive in a student's music before pointing to what is incomplete. Encouragement, in his hands, is not indulgence but responsibility.

In an environment where some teachers unconsciously measure their authority by reminding students of their inadequacies, Satyasheelji has consistently chosen affirmation over intimidation. He has never made me feel smaller in order to make himself appear larger. Instead, he has encouraged independent thinking, even when that thinking leads to disagreement. This generosity as a teacher may well be his greatest inheritance from Kumar Gandharva.

Kumarji taught his disciples to admire many musicians, not merely himself. He demonstrated how different gharanas embodied different aesthetic possibilities and insisted that genuine learning required openness rather than allegiance. Satyasheelji has carried this spirit forward with remarkable integrity.



▼ **Pandit Kumar Gandharva** (1924–92). Kumarji shaped not only Satyasheel Deshpande's music but also his way of thinking.

GETTY IMAGES

AS SOMEONE WHO belongs to the third generation of the Kumar Gandharva lineage, I have often reflected upon what truly constitutes a musical tradition. Is it the faithful preservation of stylistic features? Is it the transmission of compositions? Or is it something less tangible—a particular way of looking at music itself?

Watching Satyasheelji over the years has gradually clarified my own answer. Tradition is not preserved by imitation. It survives through enquiry.

In today's musical world, where recordings are infinitely accessible and information is abundant, it has become deceptively easy to mistake accumulation for understanding. We collect bandish, compare gharanas, imitate voices, and consume endless recordings. Yet the habit of sustained reflection has become increasingly uncommon. Satyasheelji reminds us that music is, above all, an act of thinking. This is not intellectualisation for its own sake but a continual dialogue between memory and imagination, discipline and curiosity, tradition and personal experience.

When I think back to that car ride in Kolhapur, I realise that very little has changed. Satyasheelji still cannot resist singing in the middle of a conversation. A casual meal can still become an exploration of aesthetics. A simple question can still turn into a fascinating discussion ranging across music, literature, language, and philosophy before returning, almost effortlessly, to the original bandish. That irrepressible curiosity remains his defining characteristic.

On his 75th birthday, a world of musicians, students, and listeners celebrate not merely an accomplished vocalist, an eminent scholar, or one of Kumar Gandharva's foremost disciples. We celebrate a rare musical mind of our time: a musician who shows that fidelity to tradition need not demand intellectual conformity, that scholarship can deepen rather than diminish artistic spontaneity, and that the finest gurus are those who teach us not what to think but how to think.

For those of us fortunate enough to have learnt from him, his greatest gift has never been a raga or bandish but a way of listening. And, through that, a way of living. ■

Pushkar Lele is a Hindustani classical vocalist and head of the Department of Performing Arts in Pune's Modern College of Arts, Science, and Commerce.

# Cry for justice

To call Honey Trehan's *Satluj* a propaganda film is to reduce it to a statistic, to strip it of its ambiguities, its constructed omissions, its fragile dances.

**Prathyush Parasuraman**

Getting caught in the nets of censorship is the worst thing that can happen to a film. It might be the best thing, too. In the struggle, the film becomes a martyr to a cause it was not prepared to represent, turning into a rallying cry. Such is with Honey Trehan's *Satluj*, a cinematic rendering of the life and times of the human rights activist Jaswant Singh Khalra, who went out of his way to throw light on the state's excesses in the 1990s, when thousands of Punjab's youth were disappeared and murdered under the ruse of counter-insurgency operations. Khalra himself was sucked into the morass. He died for his cause, and *Satluj* is his resurrection.

The film was gearing up to premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2023, but pressured by the government, it had to pull out of the festival at the last moment. Trehan's long battle with the Central Board for Film Certification ensued: first they asked for 27 cuts, then 85, then 127.

The absurdities piled up. Its demands ranged from the banal to the ridiculous: change the name of the film, of the character, remove any reference to Punjab, even to India's flag. Trehan puts forth a statistic, used in court documents, of 25,000 disappeared. This, too, was cause for trouble. The film became lore. Its international release was announced, then blocked.

Out of the blue, on July 3, the streaming platform Zee5 decided to release the film uncensored. Within 48 hours it was pulled down. By then the tinderbox had exploded. The film was downloaded and shared on X and YouTube. Across Punjab, community screenings were organised. The film had reached its audience. And by doing so, it stopped being a film and become a symbol.

A word used to describe *Satluj* is a word I am deeply wary of: brave. Brave does not describe the film as much as it does the context in which the film was made and released: consisting of the draconian state, its tentacled censorship, and the filmmaker's gumption in the face of it all.

It might be true that film is not just text but also context (the noise around it) and paratext (the advertisements, posters, and reviews). We do not watch films in an aesthetic vacuum. But when a film's context becomes an overwhelming presence, the film's artistry yields to its politics. A film, though, is *not* a political document, even if it can be read as one.

The pushback was immediate. The number 25,000 was hauled over the coals. It was an estimate arrived at by extrapolating data from three crematoria in the worst-affected districts, and multiplying it with the number of crematoria in Punjab.

When *The Kerala Story* put out an absurd statistic of 32,000 women being ensnared by Muslim men, that data, too, was extrapolated but from a throwaway and unsubstantiated statistic flung, like bait, by an ex-Chief Minister of Kerala.

That absurdity was called out. Should this not be questioned similarly?

Absolutely. But this demand also misses the larger point by reducing the film to this statistic–the larger point being the film itself that is woven around that totemic number. Would the film's power diminish if the number was axed in half, in quarter?

**THERE IS NO DOUBT** the film is a narrativised–fictionalised–version of Khalra that is deeply in awe of him. For example, in the film, Khalra is thrust into his work as a human rights activist after his relative goes missing. He finds the dead body in a local crematorium. He wonders, what would that relative's son do? Inspired, Khalra takes up the cause of the disappeared. It is the classic incitement formula. His character is scrubbed clean of any possible vice. His is the righteous hero's epic journey. (The villain, DGP Inderpal Singh Bitta, based on K.P.S. Gill, is as flat as the hero.)

This was my issue with the film. Enamoured by his contribution, it refuses to see Khalra as a human being. Instead, it draws a halo around this adoring father, compassionate husband, sponge-hearted employee, and steel-spined citizen. In reality, between 1990 and 1992, before the events of this film, Khalra founded and edited the monthly magazine *Liberation Khalistan*, which published articles with which Trehan's Khalra might not see eye to eye.

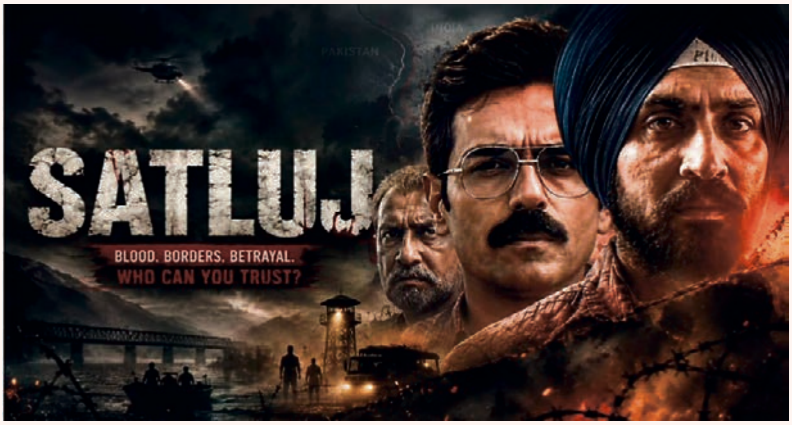
Why does the film steer clear of this?

On the one hand, the omission allows Trehan to place Khalra on a pedestal and focus on the human issue he wants to highlight: a generation lost. On the other hand, it makes Khalra less himself.

In these absences, you can feel the film's fragility. So, too, in a later scene when a man blows himself up, killing the Chief Minister. Guru Gobind Singh's words are used in the background score, outlining the bravery of never abandoning the battlefield. What is going on here? Is the film allying itself with the suicide bomber?

It is a quick scene, played before it cuts to Khalra watching the news with a stoic expression. He demands an answer to this loss of life, too—from the same man who presided over the disappearances of Punjab's youth. Trehan's Khalra is certainly not condoning this murder. But is Trehan?

In the eyes of the man about to blow up the Chief Minister, there is a sadness, a determination, but also a soft smirk. It is a poignant moment, where a film is not laying out its position clearly. It keeps the wound of that gaze open; would propaganda do that? Propaganda's modus operandi is its radical clarity.



▶ **Zee5 decided** to release the film uncensored and it was pulled down within 48 hours. BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

It is also true that propaganda is not just intention, it is appropriation as well. A film can be propaganda, and it can also *become* propaganda, by getting stripped to its basest political instinct. By keeping the film's meaning open, Trehan allows it to be appropriated accordingly, but if his intention was to sculpt propaganda, we would have known. Because propaganda is not as much about absence—the absence of Khalistani positions in this film—as it is about *presence*.

Midway through the film, Khalra is kidnapped and never seen again, except as a ghost in a much later scene. The film then launches into its investigative second half: the morass of paperwork and legal nosing around required to get justice.

Justice. That is the point of the film, its rallying cry, its rousing score. Khalra in the film is a mere medium of storytelling. It is why he is shorn of essential biographical details. This allows Trehan to turn Khalra into a ghostly ideal and use that ideal to uphold the film's humanism.

By calling the film propaganda, one is reducing the film to a statistic, stripping it of its ambiguities, its constructed omissions, its fragile dances. This discourse denies the film the right to be discussed as a film and turns it into an argument. That way, it can only be seen as and responded to as a political project.

But the problem with political projects is that, unlike aesthetic objects, they demand you to take a side, make a choice. They deny you the desire to sit with the slipperiness of a moment. *Satluj*, an act of resurrection, not retribution, might be too much under the spell of its protagonist to be a good film. But propaganda it certainly is not. ■

Prathyush Parasuraman is a writer and critic who writes across publications, both print and online.

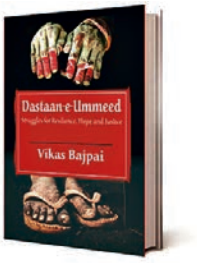
**Khalra in the film is a mere medium of storytelling. It is why he is shorn of essential biographical details. This allows Trehan to turn him into a ghostly ideal and use that ideal to uphold the film's humanism.**

# The audacity of hope

These 31 essays document life in Narendra Modi's India, told not as abstract political commentary but through the lived experiences of those who have borne the brunt of its policies. **ANAND TELTUMBDE**

**Dastan-e-Ummeed**

Struggle for Resistance, Hope and Justice



By Vikas Bajpai

**AlterNotes Press**

Pages: 546

Price: Rs.1,600

Few books on contemporary India derive as much of their moral authority from the life of their author as *Dastan-e-Ummeed*. Trained as a radiation oncologist, Vikas Bajpai gave up the promise of a conventional medical career to become a trade union activist, organising employees in his hospital. Ill health eventually drew him away from front-line activism but not from public engagement.

After earning a master's in public health and a PhD at JNU, he joined its faculty, carrying with him the same political commitment that informed his earlier activism. His previous works on public health and food security reflected a sustained concern with the erosion of democratic and social rights in India. *Dastan-e-Ummeed* extends that engagement through an account of life under the Narendra Modi regime, narrated not as abstract political commentary but through the lived experiences of those who have borne the brunt of its policies.

The title encapsulates the spirit of the book. *Dastan* in Urdu denotes a narrative in which history is refracted through individual lives; *ummeed* means hope. Together they evoke a hope forged in adversity rather than optimism, a hope sustained by students, workers, farmers, minorities, and activists who refuse to surrender despite mounting repression. That quiet resilience is the thread running through the book.

The 31 chapters are grouped into 6 thematic sections dealing with the assault on JNU, the fault lines of Indian secularism, the underbelly of Indian democracy, the COVID-19 pandemic, the farmers' movement, and, finally, the persistence of hope. The progression is deliberate. Bajpai moves from institutional assault to communal division, economic injustice, and public catastrophe before arriving at popular resistance, suggesting that hope acquires meaning only after confronting the full weight of despair.

The opening section, devoted to JNU, is among the book's strongest. Bajpai writes not as a distant observer but as a participant witness to the systematic campaign against one of India's foremost public universities. He argues that the Modi government viewed JNU's long tradition of critical scholarship, vibrant student politics, and intellectual autonomy as incompatible with the ideological project of the RSS. What followed was not an isolated confrontation but a carefully orchestrated attempt to delegitimise dissent through administrative intervention, media propaganda, and criminal prosecution.

**THE EVENTS SURROUNDING** February 9, 2016–when a campus programme protesting against the execution of Afzal Guru and Maqbool Bhat was transformed into a national controversy–are reconstructed in considerable detail. Bajpai traces how doctored videos, an increasingly compliant television media, and allegations of sedition combined to criminalise student politics. The arrests of Kanhaiya Kumar, Anirban Bhattacharya, and Umar Khalid became emblematic of a larger strategy that would subsequently be deployed across the country: the manufacture of public outrage, the branding of dissent as anti-national, and the use of prolonged legal processes as punishment in themselves.

Equally disturbing is Bajpai's account of the disappearance of the JNU student Najeeb Ahmed after an assault allegedly involving activists of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad. Read together, these episodes reveal more

▼ **Supporters** of the Cockroach Janta Party at Jantar Mantar ahead of the "Chalo Sansad" march on July 20, 2026. Hope is forged through collective struggles and countless acts of courage by ordinary citizens who refuse to be intimidated.

KARMA BHUTIA/ PTI

than the persecution of individuals or even of a single university. They expose a template for governing dissent through media trials, majoritarian nationalism, and exceptional legal measures—a template that would later be extended to activists, minorities, and civil society organisations across India. Bajpai's account is valuable precisely because it documents this process from within, recording not only the facts of repression but also the atmosphere of fear that accompanied it.

The middle sections broaden the canvas from the university campus to Indian society at large, examining communalism, crony capitalism, the pandemic, and the farmers' movement as interconnected manifestations of a deeper democratic crisis.

BAJPAI'S DISCUSSION OF Indian secularism is among the book's most thought-provoking, though it would have benefited from greater theoretical elaboration. Beginning with the anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984 and moving to the anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat in 2002, Bajpai argues that communal violence in India cannot be understood solely as the product of the BJP's ideology or the RSS' mobilisation. It also reflects structural weaknesses in India's own model of secularism, which has repeatedly failed to provide minorities with effective institutional protection. The argument is suggestive rather than fully developed, but it raises an important question: whether India's secular framework has inadvertently enabled the very communal politics it was meant to contain.

The force of this argument lies less in abstract theorising than in the painful stories that follow. Bajpai revisits the lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq in Dadri on rumours of storing beef and the murder of 15-year-old Hafiz Junaid Khan on a train in Haryana in 2017. Particularly striking is his reflection on the silence of the hundreds who witnessed Junaid's bleeding body without intervening. He refuses to dismiss that silence as mere communal prejudice. More disturbing, he suggests, was the climate of fear that had by then permeated society, a fear that helping the victim might itself invite retaliation from emboldened vigilantes or a partisan state apparatus. The observation captures an important transformation: communal violence becomes especially dangerous when it ceases to be the work of mobs alone and acquires the tacit protection of political power.

**One of the book's distinctive features is its style. Bajpai writes with the eye of a participant and the sensibility of a humanist.**

The chapters on the COVID-19 pandemic reinforce this argument by exposing the human consequences of governance driven more by spectacle than by institutional competence. Bajpai is particularly critical of the marketisation of healthcare, which, he argues, has steadily displaced the older ethic of medicine as a public service. The pandemic laid bare this transformation as private healthcare often became inaccessible to the poor, while an already weakened public health system buckled under unprecedented pressure.

Equally disturbing was the communalisation of the crisis, exemplified by the malicious campaign branding the spread of the virus as "Corona Jihad" and by reports of discriminatory practices in the provision of medical care. Above all, the book returns to the unforgettable spectacle of millions of migrant workers, abandoned by the sudden nationwide lockdown, compelled to walk hundreds of kilometres to their villages, many perishing on the journey. Bajpai treats this not as an unfortunate administrative lapse but as an indictment of a state that had lost sight of its most vulnerable citizens.

If the pandemic exposed the regime's failures, the farmers' movement demonstrated the enduring capacity of democratic resistance. Bajpai recounts the year-long agitation against three farm laws with admiration but without romanticism. Sustained through extraordinary discipline, solidarity, and sacrifice—including the deaths of more than 700 protesters—the movement eventually forced a government that had cultivated an image of invincibility to repeal the legislation. For Bajpai, this victory carried significance far beyond agricultural policy. Alongside the Shaheen

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Bagh movement against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), it affirmed that organised, peaceful, and sustained collective action could still challenge majoritarian authoritarianism. Against a political climate often marked by resignation and fear, these movements become the principal sources of the hope promised in the book's title.

One of the book's distinctive features is its style. Bajpai writes with the eye of a participant and the sensibility of a humanist. The narrative moves effortlessly between reportage, political reflection, and personal testimony, interspersed with photographs and carefully chosen Urdu poetry. The verses are not decorative embellishments; they deepen the emotional register of the narrative, reminding the reader that the struggle against authoritarianism is not merely a contest over political power but also over memory, culture, and the moral imagination. In an age when public discourse is increasingly coarse and polarised, Bajpai insists that resistance must also draw upon the ethical and aesthetic traditions that sustain a people's humanity.

The book's greatest strength lies in its refusal to separate politics from lived experience. Rather than constructing a grand theory of the Modi era, Bajpai documents how authoritarian tendencies are experienced in everyday life: on university campuses, in hospitals, on railway platforms, in farmers' encampments, and in the lives of ordinary citizens.

The cumulative effect is powerful. Individual episodes that might otherwise appear disconnected emerge as parts of a larger pattern: the shrinking of democratic space, the communalisation of public life, the concentration of economic power, and the normalisation of fear. The narrative succeeds because it restores the human dimension often lost in abstract political analysis.

At the same time, the book leaves the reader wishing for a more explicit analytical framework. Bajpai convincingly describes the assault on universities, the erosion of secularism, the rise of crony capitalism, the failures exposed by the pandemic, and the significance of the farmers' movement, but the conceptual links between these themes remain largely implicit. The reader is invited to infer the systemic relationship between majoritarian nationalism, neoliberal political economy, and the weakening of democratic institutions rather than being guided through it. A more sustained theoretical engagement with these connections would have enhanced the book's explanatory power and ensured that its documentary richness was matched by analytical coherence.

**This book reminds readers that history is not made only by governments and their triumphal claims but also by those who refuse to surrender their capacity for dissent.**

This reservation, however, should not obscure the book's larger achievement. *Dastan-e-Ummeed* is not intended as an academic treatise; it is a political testimony. Its authority derives less from conceptual innovation than from the honesty and immediacy with which it records a turbulent period in contemporary India. Bajpai writes as someone who has witnessed many of the events he narrates, shared the anxieties of those caught in them, and remains committed to democratic values in increasingly inhospitable times. That vantage point gives the book a moral credibility that detached political commentary often lacks.

THE TITLE ULTIMATELY proves apt. The hope Bajpai invokes is neither sentimental nor escapist. It does not arise from faith in inevitable progress or confidence that authoritarianism will collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. It is forged through collective struggles such as the resistance at JNU, the anti-CAA movement, the farmers' agitation, and countless less visible acts of courage by ordinary citizens who refused to be intimidated. Hope, in this account, is not an emotion but a political practice.

At a time when public memory is increasingly shaped by official narratives and media spectacle, *Dastan-e-Ummeed* performs an indispensable task: it preserves the record of resistance. It reminds readers that history is not made only by governments and their triumphal claims but also by those who refuse to surrender their capacity for dissent. In that sense, the book is more than a chronicle of a troubled decade. It is a testimony from the eye of the storm—and an affirmation that even in the darkest political moments, the struggle for justice remains inseparable from the refusal to abandon hope. ■

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Anand Teltumbde is a former CEO of Petronet India Ltd, a professor at IIT Kharagpur and Goa Institute of Management, a civil rights activist, and the author of over 30 books.

# Rebuilding a politics of care

Harsh Mander's latest book supporting public health facilities argues that inequity in access to healthcare is a moral failure, not a funding gap.

**DR RAMANI ATKURI**

What will it take to ensure high-quality healthcare with dignity for every person regardless of age, gender, socio-economic status, religion, or citizenship status? Who is excluded from such care and why? Is such a goal even affordable, and if so, how? Can private provision of care ensure equitable healthcare? These and other questions related to equity and social justice in healthcare are what the human rights activist, teacher, and author Harsh Mander explores in his book *A Matter of Life and Death: The Unfinished Journey to Secure Healthcare for All.*

Mander recounts his personal experience of encountering patients with leprosy, tuberculosis, and mental illness who were neglected, ostracised, and often died due to lack of care. The fact that these diseases are either preventable or easily cured makes their neglect all the more inexcusable. These and other experiences of encountering sick people, usually the poor, the homeless, and the marginalised, whose illness and suffering were worsened by structural problems leading to inequitable care, spurred Mander to study access to healthcare in detail.

Mander's book has five focus areas. First, he explores the right to health and healthcare, including who is entitled to it and who is not. He looks at different aspects of the right to health and healthcare, starting with the premise that a civilised society is one that takes care of those in need and that every human life is of equal worth. He examines global policies related to health and healthcare and how these are implemented in practice. Today, over half of the world's constitutions include the right to health, implying that the state has a role in ensuring the health of individuals and the public at large. The right to health implies the right to the social determinants of health as well, such as sufficient nutrition, clean water, adequate sanitation, safe working conditions, access to health services, and adequate income.

**A Matter of Life and Death**

The Unfinished Journey to Secure Healthcare for All

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH
The Unfinished Journey to Secure Healthcare for All
HARSH MANDER

By Harsh Mander

**Speaking Tiger Books**

Pages: 280

Price: Rs.599

Mander chooses to focus on the right to healthcare–a necessary, though not sufficient condition for health–instead of the much broader right to health. He explores different aspects of the right to healthcare in detail, starting with the legislation related to this right. In most countries, the right to healthcare is aspirational, to be progressively realised, and not legally enforceable. India considers the right to health and healthcare a part of the right to life, which is a fundamental right. In most countries worldwide, the right to healthcare applies only to citizens, though some countries provide free access to emergency care for non-citizens.

Second, Mander looks at whether equitable and universal healthcare can be achieved through the private provision of healthcare. His stand is clear: he believes that while the primary responsibility of providing healthcare to all citizens rests with the government, the government should partner only with non-profit and charitable hospitals if necessary. He provides convincing evidence that private provision of care has widened health inequities and holds that for-profit healthcare provision and equitable care are inherently contradictory. India's low investment in health–less than 2 per cent of its GDP–coupled with heavy reliance on private providers, including large corporate hospitals, has led to a significant inequity in healthcare access.

Mander discusses the extortionist practices

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▼ **A doctor** speaks with women during a rural health outreach visit. GETTY IMAGES

of corporate private hospitals in India and emphasises that the absence of strict regulation of the private sector results in cost escalation, overtreatment, and exclusion of the poor. Accountability mechanisms in the private sector are less clearly defined; most governments are reluctant to strictly regulate the functioning of corporate hospitals.

Third, Mander looks in detail at one of the main reasons for medical impoverishment: the high cost of medicines. The chapter looks at the role that intellectual property rights and patent laws (including the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, or TRIPS) play in keeping drug costs high by giving the innovator a monopoly over making a specific drug, often for a period of 20 years. We learn of courageous individuals like Abdurrazzak Achmet from South Africa and Yusuf Khwaja Hamied of Cipla who fought for access to cheap antiretrovirals. Although India became a signatory to TRIPS in 2005, Mander shows how, with political will, restrictions on patent laws can be resisted. The case of *Novartis v. Union of India* (2013), in which India rejected Novartis' patent application for the anti-cancer drug Glivec, is an outstanding example. The author argues for publicly funded research and development to ensure equity in access to medicines and diagnostics.

Fourth, while discussing health manpower, Mander is critical of doctors in India, the overwhelming majority of whom work in the private, for-profit sector. He also faults the medical education system for this trend, pointing to the proliferation of private medical colleges that drive up training costs enormously. Medical education also is largely based in tertiary care centres, leaving doctors unaware and uncaring about ground realities. The Cuban medical education system, by contrast, has only part of the training in tertiary centres and the rest in peripheral hospitals and centres based in the community.

Finally, Mander explains the various ways in which healthcare is funded, with examples from different countries. Out-of-pocket spending still remains the most common way in which people finance their healthcare. Other modes include government reimbursement of health spending in the private sector, private health insurance, leveraging funds from global financial institutions, social health insurance, and progressive taxation. Regardless of funding, what is essential is a strong primary care network if universal healthcare is to be achieved, as has been seen in Thailand. Mander concludes with a passionate appeal for us to repair our broken moral compass and rebuild a politics of care.

**_A Matter of Life and Death_ examines every aspect of health and healthcare through the lens of human rights, social justice, and equity.**

*A Matter of Life and Death* examines every aspect of health and healthcare through the lens of human rights, social justice, and equity. It is an extremely well-researched book, with examples from around the world on health rights, right to healthcare, health financing, health manpower, and the impact of patent laws on access to affordable medicines.

THE BOOK DREW me in from the first chapter where Mander shares his moving personal experiences with people who are unwell. The chapters progress from the personal narrative to a discussion of the various ways people are excluded from care and then to an examination of how policies and practices evolved around the world in the effort to achieve equity in healthcare.

The arguments for and against each policy are well-researched and presented, and Mander makes a convincing case for his position on the public provision of care and making healthcare equitable for all. There is, though, the danger of losing the lay reader in the chapters on patent laws and TRIPS and the one on healthcare financing. These are difficult concepts to grasp, though Mander does a good job of explaining them in simple terms. He calls on all of us to regain our moral compass and strive for a more just world where all those in need of healthcare can receive the same standard of care with dignity.

I would highly recommend this book to all citizens concerned about the state of healthcare in our country and globally. This book is essential reading for those who want to understand how health policies are shaped and how practices are influenced by political will, as well as how the Global North, the large pharmaceutical industry, and the private healthcare lobby influence access to affordable care. ■

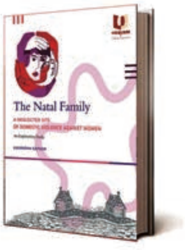
Dr Ramani Atkuri is a public health physician who works in rural central India and is the author of *Staying Alive: Dispatches from the Margins*.

# The quiet cage

Anuradha Kapoor's study reframes a woman's birth family as a site of hidden violence, not limited to physical harm but embedded in its everyday control over choices that shape her life. **DR CHRISTIANEZ RATNA KIRUBA**

**The Natal Family**

A Neglected Site of Domestic Violence Against Women



An exploratory study by Anuradha Kapoor
**Swayam**
Pages: 164

At 20, close to finishing my MBBS, I faced steady pressure from my parents to marry. For them, it was urgent; for me, it quietly erased possibility.

I wanted time and the luxury of open-ended flexibility. I wanted to lie awake and daydream about whether I would walk to my classes on the cobblestoned streets of London after getting in via the PLAB test, or volunteer with organisations like Médecins Sans Frontières, or write the NEET-PG and choose a safer path closer home. Instead, I was advised not to choose too definitively, lest it narrow the pool of prospective bridegrooms. My requests for time fell on deaf ears. At some point, the pressure became so suffocating it felt as though a hand were held at my throat at all times, an ever-present reminder that my life was not entirely my own.

What began as subtle pressure slowly turned into something more insidious: control. My movements were monitored, and I was made to meet men I did not want to meet. I spent countless nights searching for why this was happening to me, reading books like *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents* and *Children of the Self-Absorbed*. It would take nearly a decade for me to understand that this was not simply about who my parents were but about what they were upholding: caste endogamy. They did not want me to marry outside my caste or religion and were under pressure to ensure I had no opportunity to do so. Mobility, financial independence, and geographical distance were all threats to what my parents had set out to do, and so they sabotaged it.

What I experienced as personal conflict was, in fact, structurally produced and culturally sanctioned. At 20, I did not have access to the world of work, which would perhaps have explained why I was going through this–work that could have named the structure while I was still living within it.

It is precisely this shift from the personal to the structural that Anuradha Kapoor's exploratory study enables. Titled *The Natal Family: A Neglected Site of Domestic Violence Against Women,* it draws upon the sociologist Johan Galtung's expansive definition of violence as any condition that prevents an individual from realising their full potential. Violence, here, is not limited to physical harm; it is embedded in the everyday arrangements that shape, constrain, and redirect lives. Kapoor's study reframes the birth family not as a neutral site of care but as a space where such constraints are normalised and reproduced.

This framework also illuminates a particular kind of grief, one that is not tied to a single rupture but to a slow accumulation of foreclosed possibilities. When women talk about how their education and earning potential–and hence their ability to live the dignified lives they wanted–were curtailed, they do something unique and important. This framework makes visible all the bars of the cage in which the women are held, revealing how narrow, if it exists at all, the window for self-actualisation is.

I, too, continue to grapple with the afterlife of those constraints daily. It is in attending to these cumulative, almost imperceptible, cuts that Kapoor's study distinguishes itself.

While much of the discourse on familial violence focusses on visible harm–bruises, beatings, the denial of reproductive autonomy–*The Natal Family* turns to the everyday.

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Acts as seemingly mundane as control over attire, mobility, or social interaction, so often dismissed as cultural norms, are given space to come to light and breathe and recognised as mechanisms of constraint.

Kapoor places these alongside more overt forms of violence such as signalling to girl children that they are unwanted, permissive attitudes towards sexual violence against them, forcing them into unwanted marriages, and so on, showing them as part of a continuum rather than separate categories.

This becomes particularly striking in the study’s engagement with the COVID-19 pandemic. Kapoor documents how, as women returned to their natal and marital homes during the crisis, uncertainty intensified rather than disrupted familial hierarchies. Women were positioned as emotional buffers who absorbed the anxiety, frustration, and anger circulating within households. Simultaneously, families sought to regain control by tightening restrictions on women’s behaviour, using them as internal sites of regulation in an otherwise unstable world. In this process, the family emerges not as refuge but as a space where vulnerability is redistributed and disproportionately borne by women.

**KAPOOR’S ATTENTION TO** what happens when women seek help is equally revealing. Support systems—whether informal networks or formal institutions—often mirror the very structures they are meant to challenge. Women’s experiences are minimised, reframed as adjustment, or rendered illegitimate unless they conform to recognisable forms of violence. Seeking help can invite further scrutiny or a backlash rather than relief.

At the same time, the study resists portraying women as passive victims. It documents all the ways in which they cope and negotiate constraint through small acts of defiance, emotional recalibration, strategic silence, and fragile solidarities. In some cases, coping culminates in rupture—in leaving—but this is rarely without cost.

**The study documents all the ways in which women cope and negotiate constraint through small acts of defiance, emotional recalibration, strategic silence, and fragile solidarities.**

▼ BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

My own trajectory of seeking help and the limits of that help find resonance here. I turned to my college, the only institution that could offer some protection from the escalating control at home. But even that refuge had limits. In the end, I chose what was perhaps the only route of escape available to me: marriage, and with it, distance.

That this was possible was shaped in part by my position as a doctor, by the mobility it afforded me. Kapoor does not explicitly frame marriage as escape, but her work reveals the conditions under which certain choices become legitimate while others do not. Read alongside lived experience, it suggests a difficult truth: that leaving is often only possible when it can be translated into a form that does not rupture social order, most often, movement from one family to another.

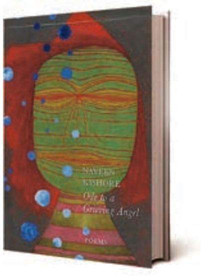
And yet, for all that it achieves, the study leaves behind a question of access. The 20-year-old version of me searching for knowledge on why such things were happening to me would likely never have encountered this work. I was not reading studies; I was looking for stories. One cannot help but wonder whether the reach of *The Natal Family* might have been wider had it been reimagined as accessible, narrative non-fiction—retaining its rigour but speaking to lived realities in a form that readers like me could have found when we needed it the most. Kapoor’s work accomplishes something vital, tracing the hidden architecture of women’s constraints. But the question that lingers is urgent: How many women, searching in the dark for answers, will have the chance to find them in time, and how many might step into possibility if they do? ■

Dr Christianez Ratna Kiruba is an internal medicine doctor, with a passion for patient rights advocacy.

# A dark fragrance

Naveen Kishore's imagistic poems, playing constantly with chiaroscuro, affect and construct, seem to locate themselves in the liminal spaces of human experience and memory. **ANJUM KATYAL**

**Ode to a Grieving Angel**
Poems



By Naveen Kishore
**Speaking Tiger**
Pages: 102
Price: Rs.399

Ode to a Grieving Angel. The title evokes tradition. The Romantics. Keats. Shelley. "Ode to a Nightingale". "Ode on a Grecian Urn". "Ode to the West Wind". Or, closer in time, Pablo Neruda: "Ode to My Socks".

Is that the intention, then? To insert this cycle of poems into a tradition of poetry? A casual peck on the keyboard tells us that most modern odes use "irregular or free verse, abandoning strict meters and fixed rhyme schemes while keeping a highly reverent tone". Well, that rings true for this volume.

And then there is the leitmotif of the mask. On the cover, Paul Klee's *Actor's Mask* (1924). The cover is designed by Sunandini Banerjee, Seagull Books' in-house chief designer and the author's colleague. An image chosen to be apposite, to speak to and of the work. The mask is a venerable motif that traces its history back centuries, in literature, theatre, dance, visual art, entertainment. Greek theatre, Chhau, Kathakali, balls, masquerades. The symbolism of masking and unmasking, of performance, of illusion, artifice, and revelation runs through these pages. Masks speak of disguise, playfulness, liberty, as much as of criminality and anonymity. Masks speak of ambiguity, liminality, flux. As do these poems.

A title, and a cover, are both significant signifiers in a book. They indicate what lies within the pages, what kind of a work we can expect, even before we enter its world and roam its pathways. So, we are already poised to encounter something mythic, archetypal, linked to the eternal cycle of human experience. Death, sacrifice, destruction. Grief, loss, betrayal. Passion, beauty, light.

This running stitch of the archetypal image knits the pages together. A grieving angel dragging her wings. A spilled glass of purple wine. Floods and storms. Fire in the forest. Khaki shadows. Jackboots on the march. A four-leaved clover torn to shreds. Shipwrecks and salvaged lives. These fragments of imagery from the poems cohere into visual clusters much like surrealist collages, conjuring up an inchoate but overwhelming atmosphere that lingers in these pages like a dark fragrance: ominous, brooding, intense. If you look too hard for a logical link, a narrative continuity, you will be baffled. Rather, these poems demand surrender, to the accumulated effect of the visuals, sounds, and smells invoked. To the miasma they collectively conjure up.

THEATRE, THE STAGE, performance, and illusion are the other group of archetypal allusions that recur in this work. In the first sequence, "One", we see, in brief snatches, Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, the tragic heroes of Shakespearean tragedy. Through flashes of illumination and flickering shadow, the glare of the spotlight, slow fade-outs and deep darkness, we are shown suggestions of the blasted heath, Ophelia's bleak grave, the glare of battle–atmospheric and emotional landscapes that are our common heritage–punctured with frequent reminders of the artifice behind the scenes: "aluminium thunderclap", "a sea of thousand-watt lamps", "hand-painted beaches". The opening line of *Waiting for Godot*, the enigmatic classic by Samuel Beckett, makes an appearance: "Nothing to be done." This constant play with chiaroscuro, with affect and construct, is part of the symbolism of the overall work, which seems to locate itself in the liminal spaces of human

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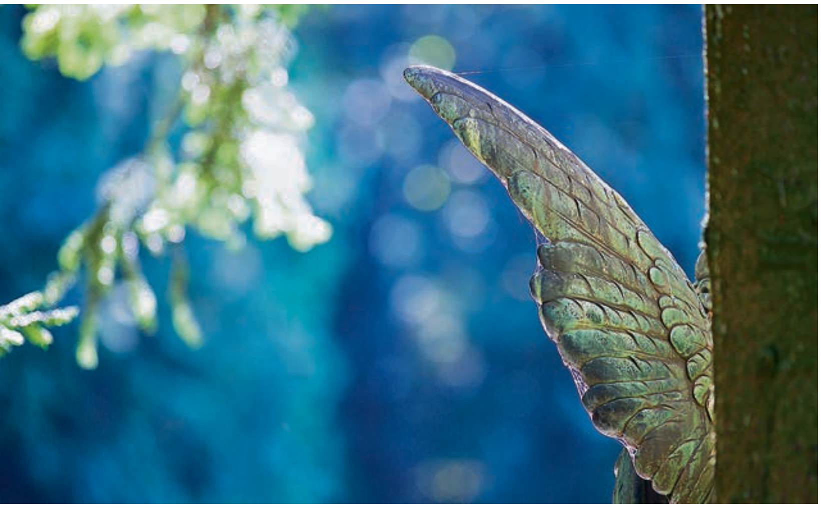

▼ **The angel** is one of the archetypal reference that recurs in the book.

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experience and memory–spaces in the process of becoming, emerging, or transforming into something else.

It is not surprising that Kishore turns to theatre and the stage as a foundational mythology for this cycle of poems. He started his creative journey in the arts as a lighting designer and earned a reputation for subtle and atmospheric effects, here transferred onto words on a page:

“the sun
drops orange
against a sky
washed
by a bank of blue lights
mimic rain
slowly
into a large doorway walks
smoky white light
engulfed in snow
blends
the salmon pink
with amber”

Like the metaphor of the stage, the angel is the other archetypal reference that recurs in these pages. The angel with the broken wings. The angel expelled. The angel disempowered, fallen. Why does the angel grieve? For the pain of the human experience, the dystopian wasteland of life, the lost hopes and vanished dreams. Wandering disconsolate in and out of these pages, the angel embodies another liminal space, between this and an other world, call it para- or super-natural.

**These poems demand surrender, to the accumulated effect of the visuals, sounds, and smells invoked. To the miasma they collectively conjure up.**

Structurally, the book consists of a cycle of pieces titled “One”, “Two”, “Three”, “Four”, and a “Coda”. This indicates that they are to be experienced in totality, as parts of a whole. As already discussed, there is a continuity in the recurrence of certain images and motifs and a unity of affect, an overall atmosphere or aura, that holds it together. Visually and in terms of form too there is a continuity across the poems. Words and phrases are scattered across the page, unexpected line breaks create a jagged effect, punctuation is unconventional, with lowercase rather than capital letters to start a section and no clear demarcation of separate sentences by full stops. His spare spattering of words at times turns into densely packed paragraphs, which then again proceed to unravel. Kishore has by now established this as an expected and recognisable feature of his writing style.

Yet this approach to form and typology raises questions for me. I am all for breaking with convention and trying different means to strengthen or deepen impact. This has been done by writers over and over again, from James Joyce to George Eliot to E.E. Cummings. But the key to this kind of unusual usage is the central question: what is the aim? Here, by dispensing with the capital letter is the author trying to convey a sort of “in media res” effect, a continuous flow with no beginning or end? This does not always seem to apply to these texts. Do the random gaps, spaces, and line breaks have a purpose? Usually, they signal a pause, a breath; again, that does not seem to always be the case here. It ends up seeming rather ad hoc, a quirk that does not enhance the reading experience and often hampers it.

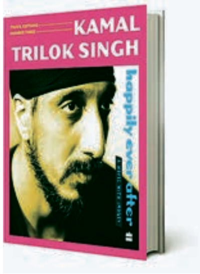
Having said this, I am aware that in poetry, as in all art, responses are deeply personal and subjective and differ widely from person to person. The above features may well enhance the experience for some. For this reader, the evocative accumulation of powerful images and the lasting effect of the overall atmosphere are the main positive takeaways from this volume of poetry. ■

Anjum Katyal is a writer, editor, and translator. She is currently director of the Apeejay Kolkata Literary Festival.

# Fries, fantasies, foreplay

Kamal Trilok Singh's debut novel is a dizzying, X-rated journey through the deepest recesses of a broken mind. **AKHIL SOOD**

**happily ever after**



By Kamal Trilok Singh
**Fourth Estate India**
Pages: 196
Price: Rs.499

We meet a woman at a bar called Bar-Bar; she is on her fifth, maybe sixth, drink of Old Monk. "I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't know." She is fantasising about the men she has wanted to ruin. How she would sketch his mutilated face and dream of crushing it under her thumb. "Not a fantasy," she clarifies, "Foreplay."

From here on, this woman–our unnamed narrator–takes the reader on a dizzying, X-rated journey through the deepest recesses of her mind in this visceral debut novel by Kamal Trilok Singh. She does a post-mortem of an almost-dead marriage; we become witnesses to a tragedy of broken love, of two people who can live neither with nor without each other. Toxic, perhaps, but that would be too neat a categorisation of the relationship.

There is not much here by way of plot. We have some minor real-life details scattered across the novel's length, like the bar she is at or the drink she is having. Or how she much prefers salted fries to the peri-peri ones–with "orange dust" that stings her tongue–that her husband likes. The location, based on stray visual cues, seems to be Delhi, but it could just as well be any other metropolis.

Much of the novel is "felt"; it is a sensory ride where you inhabit her interiority and can physically feel the ugly, often revolting, smells, tastes, and aches of her experience. *happily ever after* is a graphic portrait of an angry, complex, vulnerable, flawed woman repeatedly trying and failing to put together parts of herself and her life. And placing each memory, each feeling under the microscope to find some closure or escape. She is looking for a mathematical solution to an emotional problem; the two lines are not going to meet.

She recounts the happy early days: two people of wildly differing temperaments–she, frantic, unconstrained, in search of naked mutual surrender; he, meek, measured, too polite, unwilling to give away too much of himself–finding contentment in an emotional and physical union. The things that worked, the things that, even during tough times, made her feel seen. And, as the years went by, the loneliness that set in as invisible walls began to appear between them.

Resentments piled on: "You didn't want a woman," she says in her inner monologue, "You wanted a mirror. A soft thing to reflect your glory back at you. And I gave it. For years, I gave." How the fights took a physical turn, with regular violent outbursts from both. How so-called sexual depravity felt normal to them; the descent from digital exhibitionism together in the good years to him going at it alone for gratification, leading to animosity and apathy. How they got locked in emotional and psychosexual powerplays, with each trying to "win" over the other.

SINGH does a fine job of escalating the tension over time to showcase the corrosion of the relationship. The narrative is associative and stream-of-consciousness; our narrator repeatedly jumps timelines and moods, switching from the story of them together to her own journey. The author excels at the mounting–and increasingly disgusting–bodily descriptions that recur: spit, piss, shit, semen, sweat, blood, puke, all sorts of faecal matter giving a palpable form to the intensity shared between them. Her feelings of anger, bitterness, rage, resentment, tenderness, self-doubt, and almost devoted (and, just as often, cruel and condescending) insistence on trying to understand him and what makes him tick find physical form in their vicious en-

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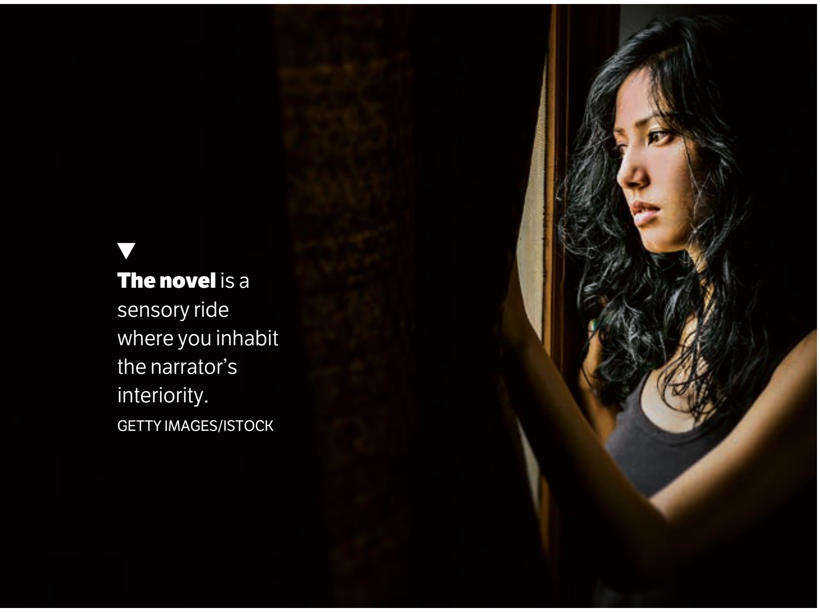

**The novel** is a sensory ride where you inhabit the narrator's interiority.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

counters. Singh does not shy away from pushing these narratorial ruminations to their bitter extremes; it aligns with the vulnerable emotionality that the novel aims for.

The writing is confident enough to go big: it is routinely vulgar, crass, sexually and physically explicit, volatile. The prose is lyrical, with a staccato rhythm that would not be out of place in a contemporary poetry collection. There is also this sense of urban grime and contemporary malaise. Yet, at the heart of the novel, there is a warped sense of romance.

The casual, profanity-laden syntax–poetic, ratatat, harsh, romantic, almost dreamy, all together–perhaps has its roots in Charles Bukowski or the Beat poets. It is a kind of cool, aesthetic irreverence. Bits of this style can also be traced to the works of Chuck Palahniuk or of the Literary Brat Packs of the 1980s, who were more self-conscious with the form.

**The voice is intoxicating, seductive, but I found it a bit off-putting.**

The voice is intoxicating and seductive, but I found it a bit off-putting. It flaunts a specific brand of machismo that I could not quite connect with. How much of it is affectation, how much is felt and real? When, for instance, the narrator refers both to herself and her private parts as "c*nt" multiple times, I cannot tell whether it is an authorial affectation or an authentic character tic.

At the same time, it is a legitimate voice that Singh has a strong command over. And he inverts its inherent masculinity by assigning it to a woman protagonist. This can sometimes feel jarring, but at others, it leads to a rewarding creative tension.

Ultimately, this recurring contradiction lies at the heart of *happily ever after*: a messy, often claustrophobic, novel with a constant push-pull dynamic, a surrealist fever dream with a heart. ■

Akhil Sood is a freelance arts and culture journalist from New Delhi.

# Fresh but flimsy

The first English translation of the first novel in Angika embodies within itself questions of representation and the politics of language. **ROHINI MOKASHI-PUNEKAR**

The promo for *Gulabiya* describes the novelette as being more than its story since it is written in a language "the Constitution won't recognize". We are told that Angika, the language of the original, is spoken by millions across Bihar, Jharkhand, and parts of Nepal but is not listed in the Eighth Schedule, and literary translations into English were "near-absent" until the present translation came about.

The literary enterprise resulting in the first English translation of the first novel in Angika embodies within itself questions of representation and the politics of language. All parties concerned–author, translators, and publisher–are acutely cued in and, in a way, play up the linguistic choice exercised by Abha Purbey. Although the print circulation in Angika is

**This is a story rooted in its culture; the rural and working class base cannot but come as a refreshing novelty, snapping the reader out of by-now stale narrative ambits.**

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**Gulabiya,** the sweetly rebellious young farmhand, is the beating heart of this charming tale.
GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

small, the language boasts of an organisation, Angika Sansad, dedicated to nurturing its own literary culture.

Maithili, the other significant language of the region, achieved recognition after considerable activism in recent history. Angika intellectuals and activists, Shivangi informs us, have supported Hindi rather than let Maithili make inroads into their tongue, which tends to be dismissed as a dialect of better-known language. It is within such riven cultural contestations that *Gulabiya* was written and became a runaway success. Its two editions sold out quickly, and it was soon at the centre of a storm over its inclusion in the Angika syllabus at Tilka Manjhi Bhagalpur University.

LOOSELY STRUCTURED and rather episodic, the novelette tells the tale of two star-crossed lovers from the heart of rural Bihar. Both are agricultural workers toiling in the humid floodplains of the capricious river Kosi. Balesar wants to till his own land; for that, he is forced to take a loan from a local moneylender. His childhood sweetheart, Gulabiya, makes his dream her own. They labour, shoulder to shoulder, fused in the backbreaking work and conjoined in the happiness of seeing the banana saplings they had bedded grow into green and sturdy plants bearing luscious fruit.

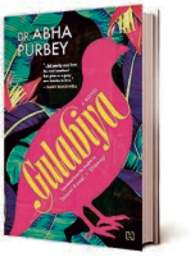
But, of course, this is rural India where caste and patriarchy rule. Neither can Balesar taste the fruit of their joint labour nor can he make Gulabiya his own. They are both betrayed by powerful vested interests who cannot allow a marginalised-caste farmhand to dream big of his own orchard or let him marry the woman he cares for so deeply. The lovers are cruelly separated, and the power brokers ensure that the ripe, bursting harvest is sold at a price so low Balesar loses all that he has invested and mortgaged. It is in its surprising twists and turns, shaped by the radical and shocking (given its audience) decisions made by its eponymous heroine, that the narrative gains fresh life and regional colour.

In this, the translators have a commendable role to play: while their ears are attuned to the original in Angika, they also free the translation of its exacting stamp. Shivangi speaks of “discarding many of the extremely literal translations… in favour of phrasing that made more sense in English”. While the resultant translation carries the cadence of a non-English language, it still functions like English. The translators have retained the material cultural base by simply deploying the Angika words or lines of songs as they are and allowing their English phraseology to function as is.

This is a story rooted in its culture; the rural and working-class base cannot but come as a refreshing novelty, snapping the reader out of by-now stale narrative ambits. Gulabiya, the sweetly rebellious young farmhand, is the beating heart of this charming tale. However, all said and done, this text is but a slight and rather sentimental fragment. Absent are heft and thick description; a deep and layered context; a host of characters in a web of relations, all of which would have evoked a specific social ethos.

*Gulabiya* is a good start, but Angika will have to wait until its budding literary culture bears a richer harvest. ■

**Gulabiya**



By Abha Purbey,
translated by Tejaswi Rawal and Shivangi
**Hachette India**
Pages: 116
Price: Rs.399

Rohini Mokashi-Punekar teaches literature at the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati. Her latest book is *The Third Eye and Other Works: Mahatma Phule’s Writings on Education* (2023).

# Bookshelf

## Fiction

*Whistler*
Ann Patchett
**Bloomsbury Publishing**

*Dooneen*
Keith Ridgway
**Fitzcarraldo Editions**

*Orlando* (Faber Illustrated Classics)
Virginia Woolf
**Faber & Faber**

*The Calamity Club*
Kathryn Stockett
**Penguin India**

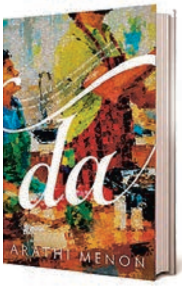
## Non-fiction

*The Renoir Girls: A Hidden History of Art, War & Betrayal*
Catherine Ostler
**Atria Books**

*Hidden Creatures: Luscious Leeches, Bashful Botflies, and the Wondrous, History-shaping World of Parasites*
Dino Martins
**Alfred A. Knopf**

*A Sudden Flicker of Light: A Revisionist History of Movies*
David Thomson
**Simon & Schuster**

*Mother Tongue Tied: On Language, Motherhood & Multilingualism*
Malwina Gudowska
**Footnote Press**


da
ARATHI MENON

### Da

Arathi Menon
**Picador India**
**Rs.399**

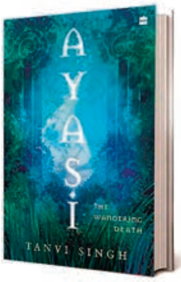
A 13-year-old adores his adoptive father, Da, who lets him be himself. But Da is gay in 2013 India: vigilante gangs are never far away and they threaten to shatter the duo's fragile happiness.

BACKLASH
DEVADAS V.M.

### Backlash

Devadas V.M., translated by Nandakumar K.
**Ekada**
**Rs.499**

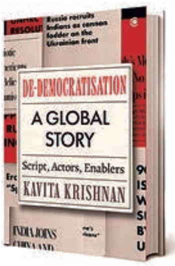
The darkest chapters of India's history, such as the Emergency, the Babri Masjid demolition, and the rise of religious extremism impinge on the life of a retired police officer from small-town Kerala in this crime thriller.


AYASI
THE WANDERING DEATH
TANVI SINGH

### Ayasi

Tanvi Singh
**Harper Fiction**
**Rs.399**

The demon Ayasi walks the pages of this mythic fantasy set in a world ravaged by environmental catastrophes, spiritual malaise, and political tyranny. A debut novel described as "sharply written and dangerously unpredictable".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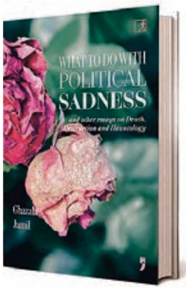
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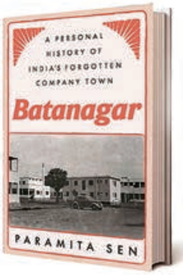
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## Short Story

# Faces

By **BAVA CHELLADURAI**
Translated by **JANAKI VENKATRAMAN**

When Mano, his friend, delivered the wedding photo album at his home, he had been away at office. That evening, he had hardly stepped into the house when Ammu Kutty rushed out holding out the album and shouting excitedly, “Chittappa, your photos!” After he fastened his lungi, he sat on the thinnai outside the house and turned the pages of the album one by one. The photos transported him to another, more cheerful world. The album seemed filled with happiness and pride. He caressed the cover of the album.

When he felt carried away by some of the photos, he wanted to call out to his wife and have her sit by him to share his joy. But she was busy in the kitchen and he couldn’t gather the courage to call out to her.

Perhaps if this album had arrived a week earlier, he might have boldly called out, “What is this mighty work you are doing? Tell Amma to do it and come here at once!” But the past week had choked him, her, and the entire household.

It was Amma who started the subject of his marriage. He recalled that, every time he tried to postpone it, Amma would argue day and night to get him to agree.

When, after much thought, he did agree, his mother was overjoyed. A month before the wedding, she began to discuss the arrangements with the neighbours, sitting on a mat on the street outside their house, late into the night. He would wonder to himself what there could be to discuss about his wedding, so early.

But apparently Amma had many things to say to the neighbours and they had much to ask her.

A fortnight before the wedding the mood of the household became vibrant and energetic. Its usual quiet gave way to laughter and chatter, a mood that Amma happily named the “wedding ambience”.

▶

**A fortnight before the wedding the mood of the household became vibrant and energetic. Its usual quiet gave way to laughter and chatter, a mood that Amma happily named the “wedding ambience”.**

His father arranged with one of his friends to provide, at a cheap rate, the festive thatch roof for the wedding venue, the loudspeakers and mike. That night Appa came home and spoke to him and Amma for long about how he and this benefactor had become friends, how good he was and what his family was like.

The family expected him to do just one thing for his wedding–arrange to borrow twenty thousand rupees.

Everything else was taken care of by his parents, his elder brother, Sethu, and Aunt Susheela who had arrived from Tindivanam ten days before the wedding, along with her daughter, just to help out. Many people, whom he had never met before, arrived at the house.

**AS EACH GUEST** arrived, Amma would rush out to greet him or her, introducing the person by saying, “This is Aunt Susheela’s eldest son-in-law; he works in the bus depot in Villupuram”, or “This is the elder sister of my elder brother’s daughter-in-law”, and so on. It was rare to see Amma so animated. She had been so only at his elder brother’s wedding and at Ammu Kutty’s birth. And then now.

To every guest or visitor, he had to explain repeatedly and in detail where he worked, what he did, how many days of leave he had every month, how he got the job in the first place and even whether he had to be very subservient to his seniors.

In the days before the wedding his familiar environment faded away. It was as if these days constituted a rehearsal for living in a world where there would be no literature or art or friends. The intolerable thought that he might be forced to live in such a world made him squirm.

Ruins Of The Night
Bava Chelladurai

Even so, he felt a sort of happiness in the special status he had been suddenly elevated to. Everyone looked at him differently, with enhanced love and pride. The photo sessions began on the morning of the day before the wedding. Mano was so patient about it, never fussing about the crowded frames, and the constant changing of poses and groups. He recorded it all carefully in his camera. Every time he finished clicking, there was a slender smile of satisfaction on his face. He remembered that expression on his friend’s face amidst all the surrounding hullabaloo.

Perhaps the most enthusiastic among those who posed for photographs were his sister, Lalitha Akka, and her children, who all arrived late on the night before the wedding. Akka slapped talcum powder on her own face and on those of her children and had many requests for Mano. “Take one of my Preethi alone,” she said, or “Hey, Ramesh, stand with your sister for the picture.” And then she would drag him too to stand beside her family for the next photograph.

He remembered the many photos that were taken at his sister’s wedding–these were hung on all the walls of his house. How much she loved being photographed! He now looked carefully at every picture in the wedding album, remembering the background, the happy atmosphere that surrounded each one. The silence in the house gave him the leisure for this absorbing pastime.

▶

It disturbed him to think that there was a connection between this silence and the photographs. However hard he tried, he could not forget the incidents that took place on the day of the wedding.

He remembered the awful expression on his sister's face as she yelled, "Who doesn't have money problems? Is that any excuse for not getting your sister a silk sari for your wedding? Why then should you celebrate the wedding so grandly? You could have finished it all with a signature at the Registrar's office!" She didn't stop with that. She dragged her children behind her and went off to catch a bus to her home town the very same night. Her husband followed her quickly, carrying a plastic wire basket. He remembered the expression on his face too.

**THE MEMORY OF** Aunt Susheela flashed in his mind. "We didn't come here because we had nothing else to do! I should hit myself with a slipper for having thought that I had to be here ten days before the wedding to help!" she had cried out with an unforgettable expression on her face.

"Forget me, what about my wife? What sort of a sari has he bought her? Will she not think that he has no respect for me and that is why she has been treated so shabbily? This is how the world treats you if you fall on difficult times!" Yet the man who uttered these harsh words, Sethu Anna, smiles in these pictures as if he is the happiest man in the world!

He felt his heart break as he looked at the pictures. Could marriage make people so bitter? Was it not supposed to be as wonderful and delightful as the world of art and literature? This experience was new and the agony it caused, unbearable. It seemed to him no matter which way he turned his cheek, the blows continued to rain on him.

"Let's go shopping," he had invited his wife. They walked along the streets, holding hands. She tried frequently to withdraw her own, feeling shy, but he pulled her long fingers back into his grasp and walked on proudly. He remembered the times when he used to stand by the tailor's shop, right there, gazing at young couples walking by, and sighing. He wondered what those couples would have thought of him. Perhaps, "When on earth is a wastrel like this going to get a job, settle down, and marry..."? "And here I am, walking by, my wife's fingers around mine!?"

The euphoria lasted until they returned home that night. Perhaps it would have lasted longer if his wife had not shown her new sari to his mother.

"Athai, how do you like this sari? It is his first gift to me! It is a little expensive, though–four hundred and fifty rupees ... along with the blouse..."

His mother's response was swift. "You can think about buying saris and jewellery later–you had better think first about how you are going to pay back his twenty thousand rupees debt! Even if he is foolish enough to buy you a sari, should you not have stopped him?" The venom that he saw on his mother's face as she said this did not match her expressions recorded anywhere in the wedding album.

He felt a sudden urge to take fresh pictures of Appa, Amma, Sethu Anna and his wife, Aunt Susheela and Lalitha Akka as they were now. He could not bear to think of the sheer grotesqueness of the facial expressions that could result from this exercise and quickly gave up the idea of a second album.

Ammu Kutty ran out from inside the house and demanded, with a broad smile, "Chittappa, did you get me Cabdury's Chocolate?"

It occurred to him that Ammu Kutty's face alone remained the same as it had been in the album. ■

**Could marriage make people so bitter? Was it not supposed to be as wonderful and delightful as the world of art and literature?**

Selected by Mini Krishnan
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Illustrations by Siddharth Sengupta

# Staying in

***The Room Next Door*** is its Oscar-winning Spanish director's first English-language film.
BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## Films & Series

### The Room Next Door

Psychological drama

Pedro Almodóvar's 2024 Venice Film Festival winner follows two old friends, the writer Ingrid (Julianne Moore) and the war correspondent Martha (Tilda Swinton), who reunite after years. They had last seen each other as young women in New York. Now middle-aged, they rekindle their friendship as Martha faces a terminal cancer diagnosis. The film explores death, friendship, and the choices people make at the end of life.
Amazon Prime Video, English 1h 42m, PG-13

### Resurrection

Science fiction

Bi Gan's film is set in a future where humanity has given up dreaming in exchange for immortality. Jackson Yee plays an outcast who moves through a series of shifting worlds, characters, and eras as the film travels across a century of cinema, while Shu Qi plays a woman who helps preserve the lost art of dreaming. *Resurrection* moves from science fiction and fantasy to silent cinema and film noir. It is a visually dazzling exploration of dreams, memory, and the possibilities of cinema.
Amazon Prime Video, Mandarin, 2h 40m

### Dersu Uzala

Adventure

Akira Kurosawa's 1975 film follows a Russian explorer's unlikely friendship with Dersu, an ageing Nanai hunter, in the Siberian wilderness. Based on the memoirs of the real-life explorer Vladimir Arsenyev, it is Kurosawa's only non-Japanese language film. *Dersu Uzala* makes a statement about ecology and conservation long before climate consciousness became a thing. It won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1976 and sold 20 million tickets in Russia.
YouTube, Russian, 2h 24m, U

### The Wild Heart of Pangolakha

Wildlife documentary

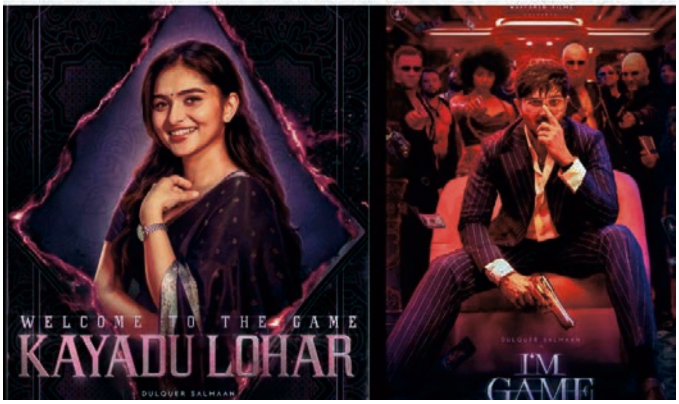
Produced by Roundglass Sustain and directed by Biont Films, the documentary explores the Pangolakha Wildlife Sanctuary in Sikkim. With the sanctuary spanning a wide altitudinal range, orchid-filled, rain-drenched forests give way to frost-covered alpine terrains as one climbs it. Sitting along the ancient Silk Route, it is home to red pandas, Himalayan musk deer, snow leopards, and a range of rare birds. What makes the film interesting is not just the footage of wildlife but also the story of animals thriving close to human settlements. Local communities living inside and on the peripheries have quietly protected birds and animals for generations.
YouTube, 9m 52s

## Audiobooks

### An Unsuitable Boy

The filmmaker Karan Johar's memoir, co-written with Poonam Saxena, looks back at his childhood, family, friendships, entry into Hindi cinema, and the changing face of Bollywood. It revisits films such as *Dostana* and *Bombay Talkies,* which contributed to conversations around LGBTQIA+ representation in India. Responding to criticism that his films stereotyped homosexual characters, Johar argues that they helped mainstream same-sex love.
Audible

# Stepping out



***I'm Game*** is produced by Dulquer Salmaan and Jom Varghese under the banner of Wayfarer Films.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## Films

### I'm Game

Action

Nahas Hidhayath's film follows a fearless gambler whose faith in luck entangles him in a series of unexpected events, turning his life upside down. Dulquer Salmaan, who leads the film alongside Kayadu Lohar and Antony Varghese, returns to Malayalam cinema after *King of Kotha* (2023). *I'm Game* hits theatres in time for Onam, on August 20.

Malayalam, 2h 30m

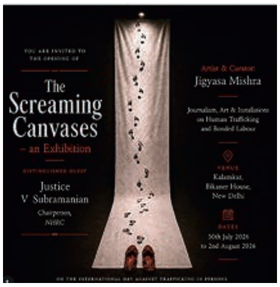
## Art

### Yayoi Kusama

Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany, is celebrating its 50th anniversary with a major exhibition honouring the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama. Kusama needs no introduction. Her iconic polka dots and pumpkin sculptures are endlessly reproduced by pop culture, in films, posters, and even textile design. For Kusama, the dots are a figurative expression of the hallucinations she suffered from in her childhood, when she would feel that her body was being stamped with repeating patterns. The exhibition covers Kusama's entire oeuvre, from her first drawing to a newly commissioned installation that fills the museum's largest hall. On until August 2.

Cologne

### The Screaming Canvases



Jigyasa Mishra's first solo exhibition of paintings, photographs, and art installations are inspired by the real stories of human trafficking and bonded labour she has witnessed in her career as a journalist. After six years of reporting from brick kilns, brothels, villages, shelters, and police stations, she presents these stories in a new language at the show. Some of these stories have been published by prominent news portals. Opening on July 30, the show is on until August 2, at Kalamkar, Bikaner House.

Delhi

## Theatre

### Waste Land

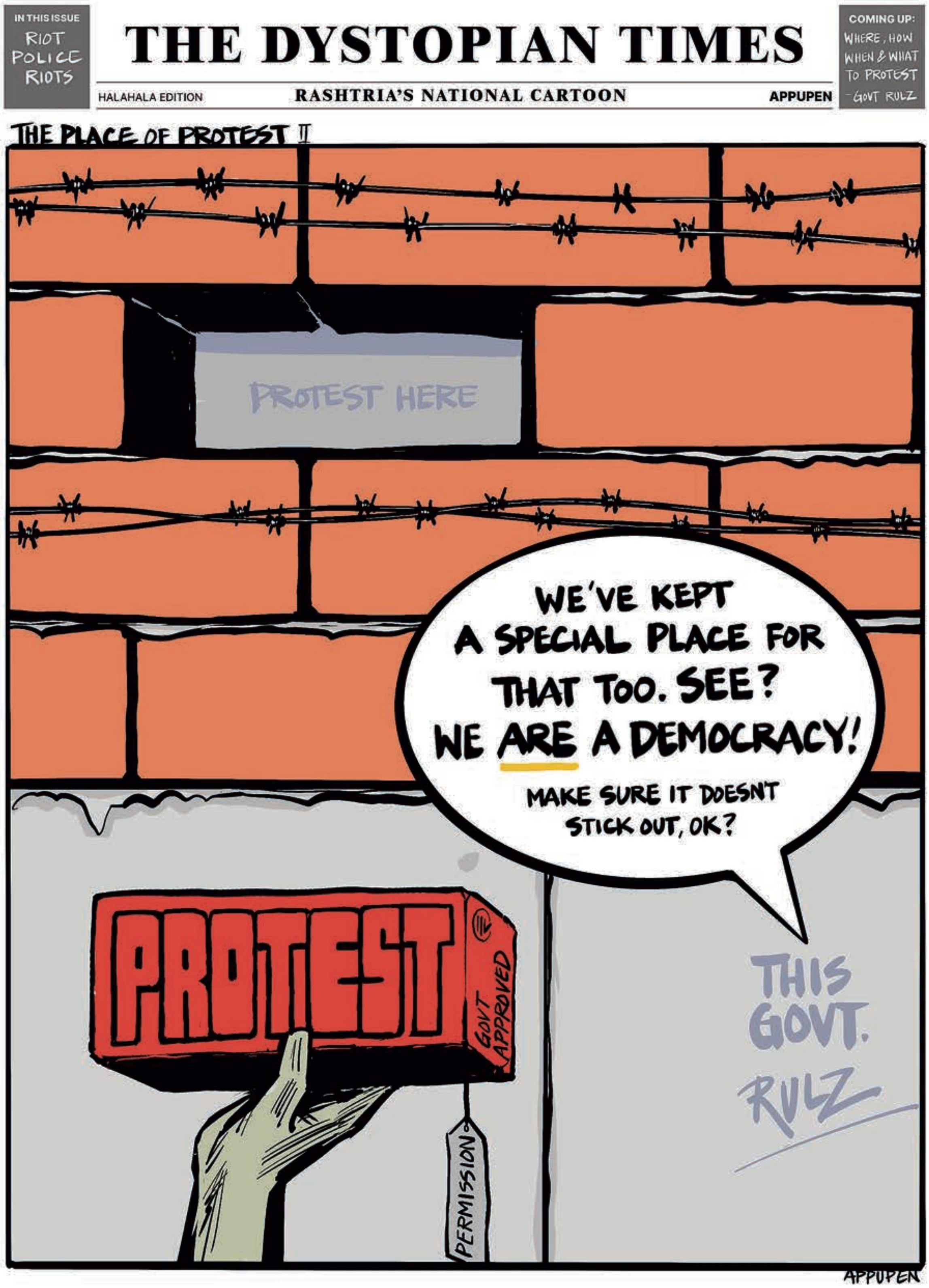
This German production brings the text of T.S. Eliot's long poem, "The Waste Land", to life through a mix of performance, sound, and visual imagery. The poem conveys the sense of a broken world by evoking a parched, barren landscape and a series of disjointed voices. In this production, a solitary actor enacts the voices, while the soundscape is created through scraping and striking with materials like steel and plaster. Performed by Nicole Kleine, directed by Axel Tangerding, with music composed by Ardhi Engl. At Jagriti Theatre, from July 30 to August 2.

Bengaluru

## Stargazing

### Hanle Dark Sky Reserve (HDSR) Star Party

The annual event in Ladakh, hosted by the Indian Institute of Astrophysics, returns this year from September 7 to 12. Designed for experienced amateur astronomers and astrophotographers, it offers unparalleled access to the night skies through masterclasses, astrophotography sessions, and telescope observations. Sitting at a dry altitude of about 4,500 metres, Hanle village is known for its perfectly dark night skies.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PROTEST HERE
WE'VE KEPT A SPECIAL PLACE FOR THAT TOO. SEE? WE ARE A DEMOCRACY!
MAKE SURE IT DOESN'T STICK OUT, OK?
PROTEST
GOVT APPROVED
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THIS GOVT. RULZ
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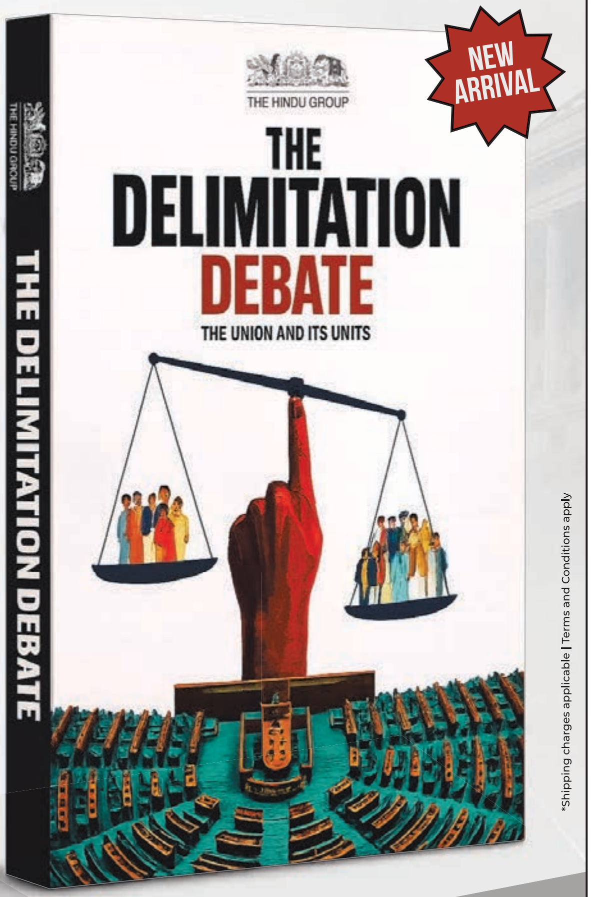
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